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GIDEON'S GRIP AT BABYLON BAR, Or, THE MAN WITH THE IRON DAGGER.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE JOE PHENIX" NOVELS, "THE DICK TALBOT" TALES, "THE FRESH OF FRISCO" ROMANCES, ETC., ETC.



THE RIDERS CHECKED THEIR BRONCHOS AND GAZED WITH AMAZED EYES UPON THE VISION.

Gideon's Grip at Babylon Bar; OR, The Man With the Iron Dagger.

A Romance of the High Horse of
the Pacific.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "GIDEON GOLDBLACE, THE HIGH
HORSE OF THE PACIFIC," "OVERLAND
KIT," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO,"
"CAPTAIN VOLCANO," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MARK OF THE AVENGER.

THE white-robed queen of night had disappeared from sight, the cold, gray light of the coming dawn had lined the eastern skies and was now rapidly giving place to the rosy tints which so plainly heralded the rising of the sun above the wooded tops of the Mogollon range of mountains.

It is of a little valley in the southwestern part of the Territory of New Mexico that we write—a valley of surpassing beauty, although small in extent.

Through it ran the swift, clear waters of the Rio San Francisco, and on the north and east it was sheltered from the fierce winds by the wooded heights of the Mogollon mountains which, rising in Arizona, stretch across the border into New Mexico, bearing due east until at their extreme end, when they take an abrupt turn to the southward.

Rich is this mountain range and its neighboring foothills in vast stores of precious mineral wealth, but, owing to the wildness of the country and the presence in the neighborhood of the red lords of the wilderness, the Apaches, Navajos and kindred tribes, who have ever been hostile to the white man, and with all the force at their command have resisted his intrusion upon what they, with great good reason, considered to be their domains, very little mining has ever been done in the section.

It was well understood that the adventuring prospectors who ventured within the shadows of the Mogollon mountains did so at the risk of their lives; and it mattered not how large the party was, either.

In fact, it was a great deal safer for the prospectors who hungered to discover the abiding-place of the precious metals to go in small numbers, not over two or three men together, than in bodies of twenty or thirty.

The small party might hope to escape the scrutiny of the keen-eyed Indians, ever on the alert for the intruding white men, while a large force would be certain to be discovered and could not hope to maintain their ground by giving successful battle to the red-skins.

But with the pushing through of the Southern Pacific railways, the advent of the Iron Horse with the horde of adventuring souls who followed in his train, caused the country to be opened up for settlement.

Valuable mines were discovered, a rush of eager seekers after wealth took place and the savages were forced back to the almost inaccessible hills, far remote from the region now electrified by the scream of the Iron Horse.

The Mormons even, from Utah, hearing of the rich discoveries which had been made in the neighborhood of the great Mogollon range, came in little squads and formed settlements, anxious to secure a share of the wealth so lavishly bestowed by Dame Nature upon any one who took the trouble to toil for it.

And it is of one of these Mormon settlements, situated on the head-waters of the San Francisco, in the beautiful little valley we have described, of which we are about to write.

Babylon Bar it was called, on account of a small sand-bar making its appearance in the middle of the stream which was about a hundred yards broad, although not over a couple of feet deep, in time of low water, opposite to the site selected for the town by the Mormon elder who had been sent to spy out the land.

There were some fifty souls in the camp, all told, and though the majority of them were Mormons, yet, as the district was rich and the metal lay in such shape that men could make good daily wages without the use of machinery, quite a number of Gentiles—as the Mormons are fond of terming the outsiders who do not believe in their peculiar religion—had taken up their quarters in the valley.

The Mormon leaders did not like the intrusion—as they termed it—of the Gentiles, but as they did not feel powerful enough to put the strangers out by main force they were obliged to let them remain, although they showed by every means in their power that they considered the room of the Gentiles would have been much preferable to their company.

There was considerable bickering constantly going on between the two parties, petty quarrels would arise, and as the Mormons were banded together, and, like a well-trained force, paid strict obedience to the commands of their lead-

ers, while the Gentiles acted on the motto of "each man for himself," the "saints" usually got the best of the struggle.

The "saints" upon entering the valley had proceeded in a business-like way.

The first thing they did was to put up a stamp mill, so as to be able to reduce their ore, and as they employed some twenty men in their claim, which was known as the Mogollon Mine, they had the nucleus of a small army.

With the rising of the sun on the bright May morning on which our story opens, came the miners forth from their cabins to prepare for the toils of the day.

And the first man in the street, proceeding to the bank of the river for the purpose of performing his daily ablution, made a discovery which caused him to shout in amazement.

This miner was a Gentile—a middle-aged man, with a long gray beard and iron-gray hair, which he wore quite long, combed back of his ears.

His name was Breckenridge—Thomas Breckenridge, but after the custom of such camps he was seldom called by anything but his nickname, which was Long Tom, for he was a six-footer, one of the giant sons of old Kentucky, gaunt, muscular and powerful.

There was but a single street in the camp, which was situated on the western bank of the river.

All the houses were erected on the western side of the street and faced toward the east, the river being some five hundred feet distant.

The settlers had taken advantage of the first bluff, which though but a small one, yet was high enough to protect the dwellings from the regular spring flood, when the snow, melting in the mountain gorges, filled all the bottom-land adjacent to the Rio San Francisco with a yellow, turbulent flood.

It was a ghastly sight that met the eyes of the miner, as dread a one as ever his orbs had looked upon, and yet he was a veteran prospector who had been searching for precious metals for nearly twenty years, and as a natural consequence of such a life had witnessed many a wild and startling sight.

In the middle of the open space between the houses and the river lay the body of a dead man, prone on his back, with his pale face, the eyes wide open, staring up at the sky.

The arms were extended at right angles, and the features of the face were contracted, wearing an ugly scowl, as though the wresting of the soul from the body had been accompanied with great pain.

The man was no stranger to the miner, for he was one of the prominent citizens of the town—a bright and shining light among the Mormons and a terror to the Gentiles.

John Nogales he was called, Yellow John more commonly termed on account of his swarthy skin; he was believed to be a half-Mexican, although he always denied the fact.

Being a powerful man and a thorough desperado, most of the men in the camp were careful to give him a wide berth when he evinced a desire to go upon the war-path and to "paint the town red."

When any of the Gentiles began to get restive under the Mormon rule—for the Mormon elder was the alcalde of the town—and seemed likely to become troublesome, it was always Yellow John who took the case in hand, and no man yet by the banks of the Rio San Francisco had succeeded in getting the best of this muscular advocate of Mormonism.

But the day of doom had come at last, and Yellow John, though stout of heart and limb, lay cold in the grim embrace of death, right in the middle of the camp which he had lorded over with such a high hand during his life.

And he had been struck down by a foe's hand, too, for the weapon of death which had cleft his heart in twain was still in the body.

It was a rudely-made iron dagger—just a nine-inch piece of a quarter-inch-round iron rod, brought to a point at one end, and with a three-inch piece of the same stuff coiled once around it, some three inches from the upper end, and then welded to it for a cross-piece to form a handle.

A more rudely-constructed weapon could not well be imagined.

And yet it had done its work as well—had sapped the life of the desperado as quickly as the most costly weapon, forged by the most skillful smith that ever struck hammer to anvil, could possibly have done.

"If I hadn't slept off the whisky I h'isted last night, I wouldn't have believed that this hyer thing could be real!" the astonished miner declared, as he rubbed his eyes.

CHAPTER II.

THE ALCALDE.

It was no delusion, though, and honest Long Tom might have rubbed his eyes for an hour without causing the dread sight to disappear.

"I must rouse the town, by Cain!" he muttered.

Then, without advancing nearer the body of the strangely murdered man, he drew his revolver and fired, as an alarm, half a dozen shots in

the air as rapidly as he could discharge the weapon.

Owing to the proximity of the Indians and their treacherous disposition, all the miners went armed to the teeth.

The unusual fusillade had the effect which the miner had anticipated; the inhabitants of the town rushed out into the street in hot haste, hustling on their garments in a great hurry.

Quite a number had been sound asleep in their bunks and had been aroused from their slumbers by the sound of the firing.

Great was the amazement when, as the half-dressed citizens made their appearance, Long Tom pointed to the dead man and cried:

"Look thar! hyer's been bloody murder!"

"How did it happen?—when?—who did it?" questioned a score of eager voices.

"Durn me if I'll ever tell you!" the miner responded, with a wise shake of the head.

"I don't know any more 'bout it than the rest on you. I jist came out of my bunk and was going to the river to take a wash, when I see'd Yellow John with his toes turned up to the daisies."

By this time the two leading men of the settlement had arrived on the scene—the Mormon elder, who was known as Jonathan Oakham, and the superintendent of the mill, a tall, muscular, stern-faced, dark man, with jet-black curling hair, bushy and aggressive, and a short, crispy beard of the same hue.

He was called Hiram Buckingham, and busy Rumor with her hundred tongues whispered that he had once been a member of the terrible Mormon band known as the Destroying Angels, whose mission it was to execute upon the Gentiles who had incurred the displeasure of the saints the vengeance they decreed.

The dead man had been a bully of the first water and on that account detested and avoided by all but his Mormon companions, but it was understood that he was nothing but a tool.

Hiram Buckingham was the head—the brains, even more than the Mormon elder, who was not over and above gifted with common sense, although possessed of a considerable amount of low cunning which served him instead.

And so it happened that Buckingham who had a stately, grave way with him had acquired the nickname of King—King Hiram, and was seldom called anything else.

The Mormon leaders hastened to the body of the murdered man and the rest hurried on behind, and when they arrived at the scene of the tragedy formed a circle around the corpse.

Buckingham knelt by the side of the body and made a careful examination.

Everything had been removed from the person of the murdered man.

His weapons had been taken, so it was not possible to ascertain whether they had been discharged or not, as they would undoubtedly have been if there had been a struggle.

But if there had been a fight and pistol-shots had sounded on the air, most certainly the camp would have been alarmed by the noise.

It certainly seemed as if the desperado had been killed without being allowed a chance to struggle for his life.

He had been in consultation with the Mormon elder and King Hiram until after twelve o'clock on the previous night, and had quitted the cabin occupied by the two with the intention of going straight to his own quarters. He put up at the hotel, "The Saints' Rest," which was at the northern end of the camp, and as the body was only a hundred yards or so from the cabin of the Mormon leaders, situated right in front of the Mogollon Mine, it was plain that he must have been assaulted immediately after his departure.

The pockets were turned inside out, and the money-belt, which after the fashion common to the men of the mining regions he wore strapped to his waist underneath his flannel shirt, had been rifled, being cut open.

This looked as though some midnight marauder had done the deed; a bold one too he must have been to have succeeded in striking down one of the best men who ever cocked a revolver or flashed an eight "bowie" in the sun in all the wilds of the far West.

"Verily, this is a terrible deed!" quoth the elder, who always in public spoke as though he was in a pulpit delivering an exhortation.

"Who among ye has stricken unto death this godly man, one of the pillars of our faith—one of the strong men of Zion?"

And the Mormon, as he spoke, ran his little, round, gray-green eyes suspiciously over the faces of the bystanders.

The Mormon leader was not an imposing-looking man, although he was big enough, but being clumsily built and decidedly inclined to grossness, with a face that forcibly reminded one of a hog, so coarse and greasy-looking the features, he was not a man to make himself a favorite with the world at large.

The Mormons believed him to be all right, but then he was their leader and they were a dull and ignorant set, mere animals the most of them, with not two original ideas in their heads.

The Gentiles of the camp both feared and hated him, and they made a stout resistance

when he had run for alcalde, but as the Mormons outnumbered the others about five to one, it had been an easy matter for the saints to elect him to the office.

The bystanders looked at each other when the elder put the question.

It was a ridiculous one, for even if the assassin had been present it was not likely he would step forward and acknowledge that he had committed the crime.

For a new camp where the strike had been a rich one, Babylon Bar had been singularly free from all crime or scenes of violence since its establishment.

There was only one "hotel" or saloon in the town; the Saints' Rest was hotel, restaurant, saloon, and general store all in one, kept by a good-natured Dutchman, who was known far and wide as Dutch Jake.

Readers of the Western story entitled "The High Horse of the Pacific," will probably be able to recall the jolly landlord of the Great American Eagle Hotel, who figured conspicuously in that tale. The Dutch Jake of that story and the Dutch Jake of this are one and the same.

Circumstances had combined to send the honest Dutchman still further to the westward, and finding his way to Babylon Bar just after the successful strike had been made by the Mormons, he, with the thrift common to his race, opened a public house, and as the majority of the camp's people were Mormons, he shrewdly calculated to catch their trade by the name of his hotel.

True, as in all the Western mining-camps, there was a good deal of whisky-drinking, particularly on Saturday and Sunday evening, and the festive game of poker and other games of chance were freely indulged in by the miners in their leisure hours, and there had been a few bouts at fisticuffs and a shooting scrape or two, but nothing "serious," and up to the present writing it could hold up its head as far as decency and good order was concerned with any camp in the West.

The inhabitants ascribed this to the fact that for a mining-camp there was a "raft" of women in the town.

First, there was the sister of the Mormon elder, widow Nancy Peckable—a lady of uncertain age, who claimed to be just turned thirty but who looked as if she would never see forty again.

In person she strongly resembled the elder, being heavily built, quite fleshy, and with the same coarse features.

In disposition, too, she was like her brother, being full of low cunning and proud and overbearing to those whom she considered beneath her.

Then there was the elder's youngest sister, who was a girl of twenty, Polly Oakham, who was decidedly comely with her bright blue eyes, round face and jolly ways.

Every one who came in contact with the three always wondered how it happened that the youngest of the family was so different from the others, for she was as good in disposition as in face and was well liked by all with whom she came in contact.

The third notable woman in the camp was named Susan Golightly, and she was a beauty if there ever was one.

She was the daughter of an English blacksmith, who, with his only child, had crossed the sea to find a home and fortune in the land guarded by the eagle's wings.

She was an almost perfect type of English beauty, being a little above the medium height, with a plump, well-developed form, an oval face, regular features, lit up by great, honest brown eyes, and fringed by the most beautiful locks of chestnut hair, rich golden brown in the sunlight.

There were three other women in the camp, miners' wives, but as they will not figure prominently in our tale, we will pass them by without a description.

As we have said, the miners looked at each other when the elder put the question.

There was considerable head-shaking amid the crowd, and then Long Tom took it upon himself to reply.

"Alcalde, I really reckon you are barking up the wrong tree!" he exclaimed. "You won't find the cuss wot stuck Yellow John in this gang, nohow!"

CHAPTER III.

THE ACCUSATION.

KING HIRAM did not pay any attention to the elder's speech, but went on with his examination.

"It seems like regular road-agent business," he remarked. "The man was struck down and robbed, but as John never was known to carry much money on his person, it looks to me as if some stranger did the job, for no one that knew him would be apt to run the risk for the sake of the plunder."

Then Buckingham drew the rudely-constructed dagger from the wound and examined it with a great deal of curiosity, a scrutiny in which the crowd took a decided interest, craning their

necks forward in order to get a good view of the mysterious weapon.

"Of all the tools that I ever ran across, this is the strangest!" the Mormon leader exclaimed.

"It is only two bits of common iron twisted together and sharpened," he continued. "Did any one of you ever see such a weapon before?"

Every head in the crowd shook a negative.

"I never did."

"Well, speculation is useless; the best thing we can do is to carry the body into the house, summon a jury and hold an inquest," he added, rising to his feet.

"Yes, yes, certainly; that is the only thing to be done!" the alcalde declared, glad of a cue as to what ought to be done.

The body of the murdered man was removed to one of the shanties in the grounds of the Mogollon Mine, a jury formed and the inquest entered upon.

Not the slightest clew was obtained though in regard to the mystery.

The last person to whom Yellow John had spoken on the previous night—the last one to see him alive, as far as could be discovered, was King Hiram.

"He bade me good-night, and said he was going straight home to the hotel," Buckingham testified, "as he was tired and eager to get to bed. I went to the door, let him out, then closed and barred it after him. The night was dark, so that his figure vanished in the gloom after he got twenty feet away from the house, and inside of the next five minutes the hand of the assassin must have struck the blow which cost the man his life."

The jury could do nothing under the circumstances but bring in a verdict that the deceased had come to his death by violence, murdered by a party or parties unknown.

Then, rising with great dignity, the alcalde announced that he considered it to be his duty to offer a reward of a hundred dollars for any information that might lead to the apprehension of the murderer.

"And as he was a pard of mine," King Hiram hastened to add, "I'll give another hundred."

Then the arrangement for the funeral was made and the meeting adjourned.

Buckingham and the elder were left alone with the body.

"Hyer, let's get out of this," the Mormon said, with a nervous glance at the motionless form of their late companion, whose outlines could be distinctly traced beneath the sheet which had been spread over the remains.

"What's the matter? Surely you are not afraid of this harmless bit of clay?" King Hiram asked.

"Oh, no, I'm not at all afraid, but it isn't agreeable; then I've an idea that I want to talk over with you, and as the matter is important, we must seek some place where there will not be the least danger of our conversation being overheard."

"Come to my shanty then; that is as good a place as you can find. You have too many women in your ranch."

"Yes, that's so; there isn't much chance to talk over any private matter at my place," the elder observed, with a grimace, as he remembered the prying disposition of his widowed sister.

The two repaired to the cabin occupied by King Hiram, which was a small structure built out of logs, situated near the mouth of the tunnel which ran into the bluff at the rear of the mining property.

"Now, what do you think of this matter?" the elder asked, after the two were seated in the cabin with the door securely fastened.

"I don't know what to think about it."

"You haven't any suspicions as to who killed the man?"

"No, not the slightest."

"Some enemy, mebbe?"

"Possibly."

"And the body was stripped to make it appear as if he had been killed for his money."

"That would be the likely game if some personal enemy of Yellow John did the job, but just hyer this question comes in:

"Who is thar 'round this hyer town with the pluck to do such work? Do you know any man whom you would have been willing to back against Yellow John in single fight?"

"Oh, yes," the elder responded, readily.

"Well, I don't," exclaimed King Hiram, evidently not prepared for this reply. "Who is it?"

"Yourself."

"Oh!" and Buckingham cast a half-angry glance in the face of his companion. "You don't mean to say that you think I killed the man?"

"Oh, no, not at all; there isn't the least reason for such a thing as far as I can see," and the elder cast a covert glance at the moody face of the other.

"Oh, no, my idea was that you could have more than held your own, if it had come to a struggle between you two."

"But, what enemy did Yellow John have bold and strong enough to wipe him out?" King Hiram asked, not pleased with the elder's peculiar talk.

"None, that I really know of, but I suspect—" "What?"

"You remember what was agreed upon at the conference between Yellow John and us two last night, touching the schoolmaster?"

"Yes."

"He was to pick a quarrel with him on some pretext to-day and either kill or run him out of town."

"That was the programme."

"S'pose the schoolmaster got wind of that, wouldn't he be apt to strike the first blow and lay out Yellow John if he could?"

"The idea is absurd!" King Hiram declared. "Who and what is the schoolmaster?"

"A miserable white-handed, white-faced wretch of a Gentile, who is nearly dead with consumption and has come out hyer for his health. He pretends to do a little mining, but he takes up so much time with his foolish scribbling—poetry or some sich trash—that it's big odds he don't clear over a dollar a day, hardly enough to buy his grub."

"And the miners call him the schoolmaster because they think he's got a head stuffed full of knowledge," continued King Hiram, as the elder paused.

"Yes; and all the man is fit for is to start a graveyard with!" the Mormon elder cried, savagely; "and if he don't want to be planted, he'd better dust right out of hyer."

"You are bitter against him, and yet nearly everybody in the town has a good word for him; they all think that he's a nice, quiet fellow, a perfect gentleman, with no harm in him."

"He's a cursed rascal, and ought to be killed!" the other retorted.

"Because he's in your way?"

"Yes, he is!"

And the elder became red in the face.

"Before he struck the town you flattered yourself that you stood a mighty good chance to make this pretty English girl, this Susan Golightly, Mrs. Jonathan Oakham, number six—is it number six or number sixteen?"

"Nonsense! I'm not married!"

And the elder's face got redder still.

"That yarn will do very well to fool the girl and her father with, but I know better. You may swear to the girl that you have never been married, and if she'll have you that you'll never be sealed to any other woman, but you can't pull the wool over my eyes, for I know better."

"There isn't any need of your blabbing about the matter anyway. You ought to know well enough not to tell tales out of school."

"Oh, don't fear; I won't spoil your sport. But I say, elder, I ought not to have any love for the fellow, for if it was not for him, I think your sister, Polly would be more kind to me. This infernal white-faced, white-handed chap has got both of these girls on a string."

"No doubt; and there's another thing that has operated against you. My other sister, the widow, is anxious to try the matrimonial state again and she had her eye on you."

"Oh, no, not for Joe!" exclaimed the ex-Danite, quickly.

"She did her best to turn Polly against you, but now she has kinder given you up and determined to take old Golightly, who is tolerably well fixed, as soon as I can get the daughter."

"You won't get her as long as the schoolmaster is around."

"That's the point, and now I propose to make him smell hemp so strongly that he will have to git up and git. This affair gives me a chance. Thar's one of my men who will swear to anything I tell him, and stick to it like a major."

"Now, then, I propose to accuse the schoolmaster of the murder of Yellow John and bring this fellow forward as a witness. We'll have our boys on the jury, and as alcalde of the camp I'll try the case. I'll find him guilty, of course, have the rope put around his neck, and then, at the last minute, spare his life on condition that he leaves this part of the country and swears never to be found in New Mexico again!"

CHAPTER IV.

A PECULIAR LAWYER.

"WELL, elder and alcalde, in my opinion you are a fat-witted rascal in general, but when it comes to an affair of this kind your low cunning manages to pull you through," King Hiram remarked in his blunt, off-hand way.

The Mormon leader chuckled; he looked upon the remark in the light of a compliment.

"Yes, yes, I reckon I know a thing or two," he replied. "But there isn't any time to be lost. Michael Cardiff—Sailor Mike, you know, is the man to whom I referred. He's a downy chap, and can tell a lie with as good a grace as any man I ever ran across."

"Present company of course excepted," remarked the ex-Danite, grimly.

The elder looked surprised.

"Why, I never knew you to make much of a fist in that line. You were allers too durned blunt and outspoken."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of myself," the other replied. "I'm a poor hand at a lie, I know; but I was referring to you, for everybody that has had the pleasure of your acquaintance knows you are the champion liar."

Again the Mormon leader grinned and

chuckled, for this assertion, too, he considered a compliment.

"Well, well, I reckon I kin hold my own pretty tolerably well with the best of them," he remarked.

"But to come back to our leetle scheme; I'll go and post Sailor Mike as to what he is to do, and at the same time give a hint to some of the boys that we intend to make things kinder warm for this durned rascal of a schoolmaster, and while I am laying the pipes in this hyer direction, you jest git four or five of the boys that you kin depend upon to help you to arrest the galoot arter Sailor Mike makes his accusation."

"What is this fellow anyway—a giant?" asked King Hiram in supreme contempt at the idea that he needed four or five aids to arrest a single man.

"Oh, no, but he may be ugly and show fight."

"So much the better then; it will give me a chance to kill him outright, and that will settle the matter without putting us to any more trouble," responded King Hiram, as coolly as though his words had reference to the death of some worthless animal instead of a human being.

The elder was something of a coward despite his size, strength and boastful ways, and a slight shudder passed quickly over his stout form as he listened to the bloodthirsty speech of the other.

"No, no; we mustn't work the Turk that way," he declared. "We are not in Utah now, you know, but down hyer in the Gentile country; and besides, this isn't the old time. Things ain't now as they used to be. We can't walk rough-shod over them hyer."

"And Hiram, have you forgotten what it was that fairly drove us out of Utah and banished us down hyer?" and the Mormon elder lowered his voice, spoke in a mysterious way and looked carefully around as though he feared that the very walls had ears and his words would be overheard.

"Oh, I remember well enough," and the dark face of the speaker grew still darker.

"But I don't believe in the cautious policy, you know. I don't take the least bit of stock in it. If I had my way I would have staid in Utah and faced the thing like a man—fought it out to the bitter end instead of coming down hyer like a skulking coward."

"No, no; you're wrong—I am sure you are wrong!" the elder exclaimed, decidedly. "But, we had to obey orders. Obey orders if you break owners, that's an old sailor motto, you know, and it's a good one with sound common sense at the back of it. The powers that be thought it wisest for all of us who were mixed up in that affair to make ourselves scarce—"

"I know it, and yet I don't see where the danger came in!" interrupted King Hiram.

"Neither do I, but, possibly, our leaders had information that they did not choose to impart to us."

"Anyway, they sent us off, and I, for one, don't regret it, for I think we have struck a big thing hyer."

"Yes, it is panning out well."

"And now that we have struck a streak of good luck we must be careful not to upset the thing."

"In this matter we must proceed according to the forms of law, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it is better," the ex-Danite rejoined. "But I'm of an impatient nature, and with me the shortest way always seems to be the best. In my eyes the biggest hero I ever heard tell of was the soldier who cut the knot with his sword, instead of wasting time, as all the rest of the sharps had done, in trying to untie it."

"Never hearn tell on him," observed the elder, with a shake of the head, "and I don't take much stock in such yarns."

"Now don't have any bloody work in this hyer matter. We must run the thing so that nobody can git back at us. The hull game is not to harm the cuss but to scare him out of the town."

"I'm alcalde, and chosen for to see that the laws decided upon by the men of the camp are executed, and if the charge is made ag'in' this galoot and I decide that, although the evidence is not strong enough to hang him, yet it seems to p'int pretty closely to him as having had something to do with Yellow John's death, then if I warn him to git up and dust, who'll have any right for to make mouths at me for so doing?"

The elder's cunning had stood in good stead, and King Hiram was obliged to confess that he didn't see why the scheme wouldn't work.

"It will! you kin bet yer boots on it!" the Mormon leader declared. "It's a durned sight better than any bloody work, for though years have come and gone since that thing that hustled us out of Utah yet it chills my blood every once in a while when I think of it."

"Bah!" exclaimed the other, in contempt; "you have water in your veins instead of blood! But, I say, we've got clear off from Yellow John's death. Who do you s'pose laid him out?"

"You're too much for me; some stranger, I reckon, who happened to run across him, thought he'd pan out well, struck him and put for dear life."

The other drew out the peculiar iron dagger

which had stolen Yellow John's life away and gazed at it earnestly for a moment.

"Thar's a mystery 'bout this affair that puzzles me," he said, with a shake of the head.

"This is like a toy dagger made by some blacksmith's boy in an idle moment; and then, why on earth didn't the critter take the tool with him? Why was it left behind?"

"The cuss was disturbed, mebbe," the elder suggested.

"He had time enough to search the body and take all the valuables and even to rifle the money-belt. No, no, elder, I tell you thar's some big mystery 'bout this hyer thing."

"Blacksmith!" exclaimed the other, abruptly, as a sudden thought occurred to him.

"I say, Buckingham, you don't suppose that the old Englishman, Golightly, had anything to do with the matter?"

"Oh, no."

"He's the only blacksmith anywhar around hyer, you know."

"No, no; he ain't that kind of a man, unless, indeed, he's a sharp in disguise and is playing us all for a lot of flats, but that can't be so. The dagger may have been made a thousand miles from hyer, you know."

"Sart'in; no mistake 'bout that. But, let's git to business; we mustn't let the grass grow under our feet. You go for your men, and I'll fix up my share in the job, then meet me at my office and we'll go for our man."

"We'll pull the thing right off now when everybody's in town, 'cos it's my game to have plenty of disinterested witnesses."

"Elder, you're displaying more sense and gumption about this affair than I ever saw you exhibit before," the ex-Danite remarked.

"Hiram, I want that gal—that pretty Sue, and I'm going to have her. You kin bet your boots on it!" the Mormon leader averred.

Then the two sallied forth.

It did not take them long to make the necessary arrangements, for about all the people in the camp, with the exception of the women, were in the street, congregated in the neighborhood of the hotel discussing the mysterious murder, and for the moment all business was neglected.

The "schoolmaster," though, was not on the street. He was a late riser, and seldom made his appearance before nine in the morning.

Rumor gossiped that he burnt the midnight oil—candle in this case—while he wrestled in the throes of composition.

The alcalde found his witness, took him aside, and taught him his lesson in private, and then he tutored some of the "boys" in regard to the part he wished them to play.

The elder knew enough of human nature to understand that in such cases as this all the people at large needed were leaders to give the cue for them to act.

King Hiram, on his part, collected his men.

All met at the alcalde's office, and there Sailor Mike made a public statement that in his opinion the schoolmaster had something to do with the murder of Yellow John, and he had evidence to back up the suspicion.

The alcalde then immediately issued a warrant for the arrest of Martin Jarrilla, better known as the "schoolmaster," and deputed King Hiram to make the arrest.

The miners soon got an inkling of what was up when Buckingham and his posse surrounded the little shanty occupied by the schoolmaster, and the ex-Danite called upon the young man to come forth.

And when he made his appearance and looked with amazement upon the crowd, which had so quickly congregated, following on the heels of the ex-Danite and his party, the Mormons, who had been instructed by the elder, in their anxiety to obey orders completely overdid the thing.

They raised a cry of "Lynch him! Lynch him! Hang the murderer!"

The crowd took up the yell, and almost before any one knew how it happened, some eager avenger in the crowd threw the noose of a lariat around the neck of the bewildered young man, lassoing him as though he had been a wild horse, or a steer ready for the brand, and no doubt he would have fared badly at the hands of the excited mob had not a rescuer come to his aid in the most unexpected manner.

Neither Buckingham nor the elder would have lifted a finger to interfere, for both reasoned that, if the mob chose to lynch the young miner, no blame could be attached to them.

The rescuer was a stranger of gigantic size, mounted on a huge white mule fully as large in proportion to his race as the rider to his.

The new-comer spurred the mule right through the throng, knocking them to the right and left without the least ceremony.

"Hallo, hallo! stop this, stop this!" the rider yelled, in a stentorian voice. "I'm a lawyer, I am, and I put an injunction on this hyer proceeding!" and with the word he whipped out a revolver and leveled it full at the head of the man who held the lasso in his hand, and at the same time, as though understanding that there was trouble afoot, the gigantic mule lashed out with his heels, and the crowd fairly tumbled over each other in their eager haste to escape from the dangerous proximity.

The rescuer is no stranger to my readers who have followed the fortunes of Gideon Goldlace as depicted in the tale of which he was the hero.

It was the man in person—the modern Samson, arrayed in his gaudy Mexican suit with its elaborate trimmings and broad sombrero, that, instead of a hat-ribbon, was ornamented by a prairie rattlesnake with uplifted head.

The High Horse of the Pacific had arrived in the very nick of time!

CHAPTER V.

THE HIGH HORSE SPEAKS.

GREAT was the amazement of the bystanders at this unexpected vision.

As for the man who had been so eager to cast the lariat, the moment Goldlace drew a bead on him with the revolver, gazing into the clear eyes of the stranger he saw "shoot" written there as plainly as though it was traced in characters a yard high and proportionately broad, and the way he dropped the end of the rope was a caution!

If it had suddenly become red-hot and seared his fingers to the bone, he could not have been more anxious to "get shut"—to use the Western lingo—of the lariat.

"That's it! that's right!" the High Horse cried. "Allers do what yer told, and then you won't git into any difficulties. Whoa, thar, Jehosaphat!"

But Jehosaphat—such high-sounding appellation being evidently the name of the gigantic mule—did not manifest any disposition to whoa, but pranced around and lashed out with his mighty heels until he had cleared an open space all around the schoolmaster.

Perhaps this was owing to the fact that the High Horse had clapped his spurred heels into the animal's sides and the tickling sensation of the sharp points had inspired the beast to exhibit to the crowd the wonderful amount of electricity that dwelt within his hind legs.

Of course it would have been easy enough for any one in the throng to have "plugged" the stranger with a revolver-ball while the mule was going through his performance, but, somehow, there was something about the man that made even the boldest desperado among them take a second thought before proceeding to "lock horns" with him, and therefore the citizens retreated before the prancing mule, and all danger of a resort to the summary justice of Judge Lynch's iron law was for the present at an end.

"Whoa, Jehosaphat!" again cried Goldlace, after the lynchers had been driven from the near neighborhood of the young miner.

And as this time the High Horse did not follow the command with an application of the sharp spurs, the beast obeyed, and became, of a verity, a wooden mule.

"Now, then, feller-citizens, and hangers-on to the backbone of the continent, what in the name of all creation do you mean by sich goings-on?" Goldlace demanded.

The fellow who had been so anxious to hang the prisoner, and who was one of the most worthless men in the town, was quick to make reply, angry at being cheated out of the "fun" which he had anticipated enjoying.

His name was Sharply—Bill Sharply—and as usual his associates had repudiated his original cognomen, and he was simply known as Sharp-Bill.

Possibly he was thus termed out of the spirit of contradiction, for he was a dull-witted scoundrel, and was anything but sharp.

"We were a-going to hang this hyer murderer!" he yelled.

"The blazes you were!" yelled Goldlace in reply, so abruptly that Sharp Bill in alarm jumped backward, thinking that in some way, not clear even to himself, his precious person was in danger.

The crowd laughed at the alarm manifested by the man, and Goldlace, as good a judge of human nature as ever tested the temper of a crowd, took this for a good sign.

It revealed to him that the fickle populace had veered about and were not so hot with a desire to lynch the young man as they had been when he arrived upon the scene.

"Wa-al, now, I'll be dog-goned if I ain't sorry for to come in and sp'ile the fun, but, mebbe, like the boys stoning the frog, it would be fun to you but death to him," and with a nod he indicated the young miner.

"But, I say, how do you know he is a murderer? I ain't much judge of the article, I'll allow, never having many opportunities for to examine samples, but, as far as my knowledge goes, this hyer man don't look to me like the genuine thing and no mistake," and as he spoke the High Horse bent the gaze of his shrewd eyes full upon the face of the miner.

And that reminds us that we have not yet introduced the reader to this young man, so different from the average Western adventurer that his fellow-citizens felt compelled to bestow upon him a name which would plainly indicate he had nothing in common with themselves.

Martin Jarrilla he called himself, and had said he was from Boston, in the old Bay State.

He was afflicted with consumption, and, as his

only hope of life, the doctors had ordered him to find a home in the Southwest; so chance had led his wandering footsteps to this obscure corner of the Territory of New Mexico.

In person he was rather under the medium size, slightly built and apparently not gifted with much muscular strength.

He was a good-looking young fellow, with dark-brown hair and eyes, regular features and a gentlemanly appearance.

He was very neat about his attire, too, and when not engaged in working his claim always wore a coat.

Quite a contrast to the rest of the residents of the camp, who discarded, except in severe weather, all such inconvenient articles as coats and vests.

Even the Mormon elder seldom wore a vest, although he indulged in the luxury of a long-tailed, old-fashioned black coat, which only too plainly betrayed evident signs of having seen hard service.

"No, sir-ee, hoss-fly!" continued the High Horse, after he had finished his survey of the young man who had been dragged, bare-headed, from his cabin by the angry hands of the mob.

"I reckon thar must be some mistake 'bout this hyer matter. This young feller don't fulfill my idee o' a murderer at all."

"Well, he is!" Sharp Bill retorted.

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"How do you know? Did you see him do it?"

"No, but I—well, I—"

"Oh, hush up, yer yawp!" cried Goldlace, impatiently. "Go put yer head in soak, or back up ag'in my mule, Jehosaphat, hyer, and let the beast kick some sense inter you!"

"Say! Some of the rest of you fellers wot has got some sense chip in. Has this man been tried and convicted, and is it a sure-enough Judge Lynch and no mistake, or has this hull durned thing gone off at half-cock? Spit it out now, some of you cripples!"

Long Tom Breckenridge was quick to reply. He had not liked the way things were going; that the schoolmaster had anything to do with the taking off of the desperado was to him a supremely ridiculous idea, and he intended to protest against the hanging, but the tide of public opinion had set so strongly in favor of the summary process that he had been silenced.

But now that there was a chance to speak he was eager to improve the opportunity.

"No, sir-ee!" the miner cried, "thar ain't been no trial, nor nothing, but the gang was jest a-going to string the young feller up anyway."

"A nice set of p'isoned galoots you air, I must say!" Goldlace exclaimed, surveying the crowd with a look of withering contempt.

"Didn't he kill the man, an' hadn't he ought for to hang?" Sharp Bill demanded.

"Say, you take a back seat, and don't open your head ag'in, or I'll jump clean down your throat and strangle you to death!" the High Horse cried, with a ferocious glance at the bold speaker.

Sharp Bill immediately sidled behind the man who stood next to him, as though he really imagined there was danger that the stranger might perform the peculiar operation which he threatened.

"Look a-hyer!" the High Horse continued, addressing the crowd, "you men seem to be pretty decent sort of fellows, and I reckon that you ain't rightly got the rights of this hyer thing. Is it sartain, without any doubt, that this man has been guilty of any foul deed for which he ought to be hanged?"

"I don't even know of what I am accused!" the schoolmaster exclaimed, before any one else could speak. "I had just got up when the alcalde knocked at my door. I opened it to see what was wanted. He said something about being sorry to arrest me, and as I stepped out in astonishment to ask for an explanation, the crowd seized me, a lariat was thrown around my neck, a cry went up to hang me immediately, and I believe I would have been a dead man by this time if Heaven had not sent you to my assistance, but as to what I have done to deserve to be hanged I know no more than a babe unborn."

"Pears to me, fellow-citizens, that you've kinder been running a leetle too fast in this hyer matter," Goldlace remarked. "And for the credit of your town it's a lucky thing that I happened in as I did."

The Mormon elder was annoyed at both the words and manner of the stranger, and thought it was time he said something.

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

"I RECKON the credit of our town will take care of itself without your help, stranger," the elder remarked, endeavoring to throw as much dignity into the speech as possible.

"How are ye, Mister man?" ejaculated Goldlace, with such a quizzical look at the elder that it made all the Gentiles in the crowd smile.

The Mormon had made himself obnoxious to all the citizens who did not belong to his faith, and they were not sorry to see some one inclined to beard the ruler of the town.

"Kinder gitting up on your ear, I reckon," the reckless adventurer continued.

"Wa-al, that's jist the way I like to see things. Brace up, and have some style about you!"

"Say! Who's your tailor? Who built that coat for you? Durn me, if that ain't the biggest thing I've seen in the coat line since I went to the museum and feasted my eyes on the coat that old Noar wore in the Ark."

Even the Mormons could not resist tittering at this onslaught on the elder's coat, but that worthy himself did not appreciate the joke at all.

In fact, he became so red with rage and so swelled out, frog-like, with anger, that it really seemed as if the man would burst before he would be able to speak.

"Do you—do you know who I am?" he ejaculated, at last.

"Nary time," replied the High Horse, laconically.

"I'm the alcalde of this town."

"Oh, you're the head-cook and bottle-washer in these hyer diggin's? You're the king-pin, 'Up in the Mormon land!'" sung Goldlace, at the top of his voice.

"Yes, I am; and I'll thank you to treat me with the respect due to my station."

"Who dares for to say that I ain't a-treating you with respect?" cried Goldlace, assuming to be deeply astonished. "I'd like to see the cuss that would dare to even 'spicion sich a thing. He'd climb me, or I'd climb him, or both would climb t'other afore we was two minutes older," he continued.

"Well, it's all right, if you didn't mean any offense," the elder declared.

He in truth was not at all satisfied, for the apology was about as bad as the offense, but as he didn't see exactly how to help himself he professed to be content.

"Offense!" cried the High Horse; "wa-al, you kin jest bet thar wasn't no offense meant. Why, I jest love you Mormon ducks! I reckon I'd be a Mormon myself, only, somehow, religion of any kind never seemed able to git a good grip upon me."

"Mebbe I wasn't vaccinated for it in the right way."

By this time the elder had made up his mind that the best way to get along with this intrusive and talkative stranger was to quietly ignore him as much as possible; so he addressed himself to the schoolmaster.

"Is it possible," he said, "for you to pretend ignorance in regard to the crime of which you are charged?"

"It is possible," the young man replied, firmly, "for I haven't the least idea of what you mean."

"You know of the tragedy that happened last night?"

"No, sir, I do not," the schoolmaster replied, in amazement; and Goldlace, watching him narrowly, decided that, if the young man's ignorance was assumed, he was indeed a good actor.

"Yellow John is dead," said the elder; "he was murdered last night, and his lifeless body was found in the street this morning, and you are suspected of the murder."

"I suspected?" and the schoolmaster stared at the elder.

"More than suspected—you are accused of doing the deed!"

"It is absurd!—why should I kill Yellow John, a man to whom I never spoke ten words in my life?" exclaimed the young man.

"I don't know anything about that; you may have had some secret quarrel with him, and as you could not hope to cope with him openly you took advantage of the dark to slay him."

"Nonsense! I never had an angry word with Yellow John in my life!" the young man declared. "I never even spoke to him except to pass the time of day when we met, and I believe when I first came to the camp he took a drink at my expense."

"Of course if you were guilty of the deed you would deny it," the elder remarked; "it is not to be expected that the man bold enough to lay out such a fellow as Yellow John would be weak enough to squeal when accused of the crime. Oh, no; I don't expect you are going to give yourself dead away after that fashion. I never took you to be a fool, you know."

"How is it that I am suspected of committing the crime?" the schoolmaster demanded.

"You will see when your trial comes off," the Mormon leader replied.

"Go at it then, as soon as possible, for Heaven's sake!" the young man retorted; "I know there cannot be the slightest particle of evidence against me, so the sooner you get at the trial the better."

"Now you are barking up the right tree, alcalde!" the High Horse exclaimed; "but when you come to hang a man afore you try him it's a kinder getting the cart afore the hoss, to my thinking."

The Mormon took no notice of the remark, as he had made up his mind to ignore the stranger as much as possible.

He liked neither the appearance of the man, nor his ways, and his instinct seemed to warn him that the horseman was one of those men

whose absence would be better than his company.

These free-spoken, independent men are not wanted

"Up in the Mormon land."

Nor in any district where these modern "saints" aspire to the control.

"Now, if you will surrender yourself to King Hiram's custody, we'll proceed to my office and go ahead with the trial," said Oakham.

"Certainly, I haven't the least fear in regard to the result, and I am sure my accuser must be laboring under some mistake when he charges me with having anything to do with the crime."

"You jest wait and see!" cried Sailor Mike, who had been priming himself with whisky from a flask which he had in his pocket, in order to fortify himself for the trial in prospect, and the liquor had made him rather loose of tongue.

The elder cast a warning glance at Mike, and he, perceiving that he had made a mistake in speaking, slunk back into the crowd.

The High Horse, though, had noted the man's looks; had immediately come to the conclusion that he was the witness who was to testify against the prisoner, and a look of contempt passed over his face.

"I swow I wouldn't like to hang a yellow cur dog on the testimony of sich a low-down-looking scoundrel as that son of a skunk," he muttered to himself.

"Come on then, fellow-citizens, and we'll git right to work at this hyer thing," remarked the elder, taking up the line of march for his office as he spoke.

King Hiram and the schoolmaster followed, the ex-Danite posse right behind, and the crowd came in the rear.

The High Horse, who was in the "rush," opened a conversation with Long Tom Breckenridge, who had purposely lingered behind that he might have a chance to explain how things were to the stranger.

"You see, sir, this hyer is a Mormon town," he said. "The Mormons made the fust strike hyer, and though a few of us Gentiles, as the saints call us, have drifted in, yet the Mormons are five to one ag'in us; and that's how they come to run this fat galoot of a Mormon elder in as alcalde. When it came to a vote we Gentiles were whipped clean out of our boots."

"This feller is the head devil of the hull b'iling, and in course it is only nat'ral that he should want to have everything his own way."

"Lately there came to the camp an Englishman, with as nice a looking gal as you ever laid eyes on. Oh, she's a beauty and no mistake! The elder has had his eyes on her from the beginning—they do say he's got 'bout a dozen wives up in Utah now, but that don't mount to anything, you know; the more wives one of these cusses kin git his claws onto, the bigger man he is, I reckon."

"Wal, he has kinder been a-sparking of the gal, but since this schoolmaster struck the camp, I reckon the elder see'd that he didn't stand no sort of a show to git the gal, and I think this hull thing is a put-up job to run the schoolmaster out."

"One of the Mormon gang was laid out last night. I was the fust man this morning to discover the body a-lying stark and stiff. Some feller went for him with an awfully curious iron dagger, and it only took one blow to finish him, and then the cuss wot did the job jest stripped the dead man of every bit of valuables that he had, which looks as if the murderer was arter plunder principally, though as this Yellow John, who was the man who was salivated, was an ugly, overbearing feller, allers in a quarrel, mebbe some enemy did it. Anyhow, thar ain't no doubt that the schoolmaster didn't have no more to do with it nor you or I."

"Who is this feller who yelled 'Wait and see?'"

"One of the meanest Mormon brutes in the town—Sailor Mike he's called. Michael Cardiff is his right name. He's always drunk when he's got any money, or kin find anybody fool enuf to set up the bug-juice for him."

"Do you think he really knows anything 'bout the murder?"

"Nary thing!" the other replied, contemptuously. "He was as drunk as a b'iled owl last night. Why, 'bout twelve o'clock he was so slewed that he crawled under a leetle shed that thar is at the back of my shanty, and he was sound asleep thar this morning when I got up."

"And the man was killed, when?"

"Between twelve and five. It was a leetle arter five when I discovered the body."

"He couldn't have witnessed the murder, then?"

"Nary time! and then the night was so dark—thar wa'n't no moon, you know—that a man on hossback couldn't have seen the ears of his animal."

"I remember the night was a dark one," the High Horse observed, thoughtfully.

"Are you willing to testify to these hyer facts?"

"Certainly! Why not?"

"If the thing is as you say, you'll git the Mormon elder down on you."

"I can't help that," replied the other, doggedly. "The truth's the truth, and I wouldn't be

much of a man if I didn't stand up and spit it out when the life of a feller-critter is in danger."

"Give me your hand, old man! You're true blue, every inch of you, and darn me if I don't stick by you if you git into any trouble with these Mormon galoots."

The two clasped hands warmly.

"I'm going to stick a leetle spoon in this soup myself," Goldlace continued. "Mebbe I will burn my mouth, but I'm going to wade in, jest for greens!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE VISION ON LONE MOUNTAIN.

AND now we must hurry matters forward a little, and leaving the particulars of the trial of the schoolmaster for the alleged murder of the Mormon desperado, Yellow John, to be detailed in another chapter, we must relate a strange occurrence that happened to a couple of worthy citizens of Babylon Bar who were on their way from that camp to the Zuni Agency on the headwaters of the Zuni river.

They had taken the upper trail, as it was called, which ran by Lone Mountain.

The reader must not confound this Lone Mountain—which was so termed locally because it happened to be a single, isolated peak—with the famous Lone Mountain mining district, near Silver City, a hundred miles or more to the southward. It is a common custom for settlers to dub any isolated peak by the name of Lone Mountain.

The two travelers were prominent citizens of the camp.

One of them the reader has already heard of—Clement Golightly, the English blacksmith—who had crossed the briny deep with his fair British flower, his beautiful daughter, to seek for better fortune in a foreign land than had been vouchsafed him at home.

In person the Englishman was short and thick-set—a dumpy sort of a man; in short, a typical Briton, with a round, red face and a dull, stolid look; a regular beef-eater, and no mistake, and how such a common-place, inferior-witted man, with a deal of the animal about him, could possibly have had such a daughter as the bright, cheerful, intelligent, ladylike English girl was a mystery which puzzled all thoughtful people who became acquainted with the two.

The blacksmith's companion was one of the leading Mormons of the town, a tall, lanky "saint," a Puritanical-looking fellow, although, dressed as he now was in corduroy breeches, huge boots and a flannel shirt with a small arsenal of weapons belted to his waist, he presented a decidedly warlike appearance.

But it was the custom of the country to go thus dressed and equipped, for, to use the old Texas saying, "a man might go a hundred years in this district and not need a weapon, but when he did need one—he needed it *bad*."

Even the peaceful, stolid Englishman was armed to the teeth.

The Mormon answered to the name of Samuel Barrington. He was treasurer of the mine, and from his peculiar way of talking and acting the irreverent Gentiles had bestowed upon him the name of Soapy Sam, and as such names generally stick when rightly applied, the lanky Mormon was seldom called anything else, when his name came up in common conversation, even by his Mormon associates.

The two men were bound for the Zuni Agency, on a cattle speculation. The Mormon had heard of some cheap beeves over there, and as he couldn't handle the matter alone he had roped the old blacksmith into the speculation.

Golightly was a close-fisted customer, and, although he had not dwelt long in the mining-camp, the boys had "taken his measure" to the fraction of a hair, and in their outspoken way declared that "ther durned old galoot of a blacksmith would skin a flea for his hide and taller!"

Public opinion in such matters is usually pretty nearly correct, and there is no doubt that the Englishman was the greatest miser who had yet struck the town.

And as misers are generally rich, the wise-aces of the camp got it into their heads that the blacksmith was "well fixed;" but this was an error, for the Englishman was as stupid as he was miserly and hadn't sense enough to keep the money which he had so carefully hoarded.

A glowing prospect—a chance to make ten dollars by investing one, was sure to catch him, and so, all through his life, he had been the easy dupe of each new swindler.

He was honest enough to say that he hadn't any money to speak of, but, as usual in such cases, no one believed him.

It was about sixty miles from the mining-camp to the old Indian Agency, and the travelers had timed the journey so as to arrive at their destination about twelve o'clock.

Then they could examine the cattle, make their purchases and start for home at an early hour in the day.

The two were mounted on bronchos, as the small horses common to the region are called—hardy little beasts, which, like singed cats, are a great deal better than they look—and they

had gone on without incident until about nine at night, when they came to the point where the trail wound around the side of Lone Mountain.

Here the light gray rock shot up a hundred feet into the air, as straight and regular as though it was a wall built by a mason's cunning hands.

If this vast and regular expanse of rock had been in a civilized region some vandal would surely have disfigured its fair surface with the pressing invitation:

"DO TRY BULLY'S BITTERS!"

Or the startling opinion:

"TAKE PILLY'S PILLS, OR DIE!"

But, afar off in the wilds of this wilderness it stood in its virgin beauty, just as it had come from the hands of earth's great architect.

A gently undulating plain, dotted here and there with little clumps of timber, extended from the base of the mountain to the southward.

The night was not particularly light, for the moon was a young one, and, as the old saying hath it, only gave light enough to make the darkness visible.

The travelers were within thirty feet of the mountain when they were startled by an unexpected sight.

Both had their eyes upon the fair face of the light gray rock, when, suddenly, a circle of light some ten feet in diameter appeared thereon, and in the center of the circle was a huge picture of the simple yet curious weapon which had stolen away the life of Yellow John!

And over the weapon was an inscription, which said:

"Stand and deliver to the Iron Dagger."

The riders checked their bronchos, and gazed with amazed eyes upon the vision.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TOLL-GATHERER.

"WHAT on earth does this mean?" quoth the Mormon, unable to account for the strange sight.

"Ang me if I know!" responded the Englishman. "Tain't a ghost, you know, is it?"

Even the bronchos understood that there was something wrong about this strange sight on the bald side of old Lone Mountain, and they elevated their ears and sniffed suspiciously, as much as to inquire the reason of the vision.

"Oh, no; but upon my soul, I don't understand it at all."

Soapy Sam was greatly troubled, for he had a suspicion that the sight boded no good to either himself or his companion.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the vision vanished.

The riders drew a long breath.

"Upon my word, I must say that this is about the strangest thing in all my experience," the Mormon remarked, turning to his companion.

"Yes, it's very hodd," responded the blacksmith. "How do you haccount for it?"

"I can't account for it at all," declared the other, with a shake of the head.

"Hit's too much for me, Samuel, and I gives it up."

The Englishman would misplace his h's.

"It isn't a mirage, for that is in the sky, although it seems to be something of that kind," observed Barrington, thoughtfully.

The Mormon was a well-educated man, and why he had ever chosen to cast his lot amid the wilds of the West, and had joined the "Saints," who, as a rule, are illiterate and uncouth people, was a mystery, unless the idle gossip was founded on facts, that declared that he had committed crimes in the East which had forced him to seek concealment in the thinly-settled West.

"Yes, yes, p'haps that's hit," remarked the blacksmith, with a wise shake of the head.

In truth, he hadn't the remotest idea of what his companion meant, but was shrewd enough to conceal his ignorance.

"And then a mirage is only seen by day," the Mormon continued. "I don't remember of ever hearing of a case where it appeared at night."

"No, nor me, too," chimed in Golightly.

"But it's all nonsense!" exclaimed Soapy Sam, abruptly. "I am a fool to waste my time in speculating about it. If there was any *motive* for the thing I should certainly think that somebody was playing a trick upon us."

"Just like for to catch 'em hat it, that's hall!" and Golightly doubled up his massive fists in a warlike manner.

"Let's push on!"

But no sooner had the pair touched their bridle reins when another vision appeared upon the smooth surface of the rock.

First came the circle of light as before, and then in the center appeared the injunction:

"Surrender your valuables and depart, or beware the wrath of the Iron Dagger!"

Then the truth suddenly flashed upon the Mormon: they had fallen into the toils of a road-agent who had arranged this novel device to make his victims "come down" without trouble.

"It's a trick, and some villains are going for

our money. Out with your weapons, spur up, and ride on!" the Mormon ordered, in a low tone.

He was not a particularly courageous man, but, as the robbers had not made their appearance, he fancied there yet might be a chance of escape.

So into the sides of the bronchos went the sharp spurs, and the little beasts, indignant at such unexpected treatment, plunged forward in extremely bad humor.

And then, right in front of the animals, who were leaping forward side by side, flashed the circle of light.

As the light played upon the ground it was too much for the now excited bronchos. They suddenly shied and then "bucked," after the most approved fashion known to the wild steeds of the wild West.

As a result, both riders were pitched headlong from their saddles and struck the ground with a shock that sent their revolvers spinning from their hands.

Having dismounted their riders, the bronchos wheeled and galloped off on the homeward trail.

When the travelers recovered from the shock and sat up—neither one having sustained material damage—they found themselves confronted by a sight which caused them to stare in amazement.

A few feet from them stood a tall figure, that apparently was full seven feet high, clad in a loose white robe which fell in wavy folds from the head, and which completely concealed the entire body.

But instead of a hat the head was crowned with a lamp—a singularly ingenious contrivance which illuminated the surroundings brilliantly.

In his hands the disguised man held a repeating rifle threateningly, and at the first glance the dismounted men perceived that resistance was useless—they were helplessly in the power of this strangely-attired road-marauder.

"You sharps don't want to try that game on me ag'in!" the road-agent cried, in a hoarse voice, evidently disguised. "When pilgrims come along this hyer trail and see my say-so on the rock yonder, I expect them to pony up like men. How do you expect I'm going for to keep the road in order if every sharp that comes along tries to jump the toll?"

"The toll?" the Mormon asked.

"Pre-exactly! That's w'ot I sed. I'm the toll-gatherer for this hyer district. Didn't you hearn tell of my appointment?"

The Mormon was obliged to confess his ignorance of the fact.

"Yes, sir; you kin bet all your ducats on it!" the marauder declared, emphatically; "and I'd like for to have you tell all your friends, too. I've been appointed toll-gatherer on every road that leads out of Babylon Bar camp, and don't you forgit it! You sharps are making too much money down thar, and it's 'bout time thar was a divvy; you hear my horn? Then *shell out*!"

And the travelers *did* shell out, though extremely reluctantly; but what could they do, menaced as they were with the repeating-rifle? Resistance was madness.

The road-agent collected their wealth, then bade his victims turn their backs to him.

"Don't dare to look 'round!" he commanded, "or I shall have to drill a hole right through your noddles."

Believing that the fellow was fully capable of keeping his word, the pair faced the rock.

The footsteps of the road-agent died away in the distance. Five minutes passed and then the circle of light shone again on the rock wall, and within it was written:

"Ta, ta! git!"

The twain did "git," heading for Babylon Bar as fast as they were able.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIAL.

IN the alcalde's office the trial of the schoolmaster took place.

The office was a large shanty, one story only in height, but covering more ground than any other building in the camp.

In it, on Sunday, the Mormon service was held, the elder always officiating, and there were rude board seats, sufficient to accommodate about fifty people, so there was room for everybody in the camp to attend the trial, and, in fact, about everybody in the town was present, including the women-folks, who modestly remained in the background, although some of the gallant miners were ready to surrender the front seats which they had secured, in favor of the gentle members of the fair sex.

At the end of the building furthest from the door was a large board platform, some two feet high, on which a rude sort of a desk had been arranged at which Oakham was wont to preside with great dignity when, as alcalde, he was called upon to settle any matters appertaining to the office.

But this was really the first important thing that had occurred since the founding of the camp, and, to use the old saying, the elder "felt his oats" when he ascended the platform and took his seat at the desk.

A chair was placed at the Mormon's right hand for the accommodation of the prisoner. King Hiram and his posse occupied a bench in the rear of the schoolmaster, and Sailor Mike helped himself to a box on the left of the alcalde's desk, while the motley throng who had followed in the rear took possession of the seats usually occupied by the Mormon worshipers.

From the bold manner in which Sailor Mike had taken possession of the seat upon the platform uninvited, all had a suspicion that he was the witness upon whose accusation the young miner had been arrested.

By the time all within the room had fairly settled down in their seats the old miner and the High Horse made their appearance.

Long Tom slipped into a vacant seat at the end of the room, but Goldlace strode down the center aisle until he came to the open space between the seats and the platform, and there he halted and gazed around him.

"No seats hyer," warned the alcalde, who was annoyed at what he considered to be the audacity of the stranger. "You'll have to go to the rear of the room if you want to sit down."

"Oh, no; I'll take a seat right hyer on the platform, thank you; don't trouble yourself about me, I beg."

And in the coolest manner possible, despite the scowls of the alcalde, and the black looks of the Mormons upon the platform, who were all disgusted at the stranger's impudence, the High Horse walked to where the platform joined the wall to the right of the prisoner and sat down, resting his back against the wall.

The Mormon leader was indignant, and he made up his mind to have the stranger out of that.

"See hyer, I can't allow that!" he exclaimed, angrily. "It's ag'in' my rules to allow anybody to sit on the platform."

"Ag'in' your rules, do I understand?" remarked the High Horse, assuming as comfortable a position as possible.

"Yes, ag'in' my rules!" the alcalde repeated, with decided emphasis.

"Wa-al, that's pesky bad, I'll allow, but I reckon you'll make an exception in my favor."

"No, stranger, I sha'n't!" cried the Mormon elder, defiantly.

"Wa-al, I'll be more accommodating than you are and make the exception for you," responded Goldlace, as cool as a cucumber.

A snicker ran through the audience, and the elder got as red as a boiled beet. He seemed destined to get the worst of it every time he came in contact with the stranger.

"Sides, alcalde, you don't seem to get at the rights of this hyer thing," the High Horse added, as the Mormon elder hesitated, really at a loss for words.

"I s'pose you don't quite get it through your wool that I'm the prisoner's lawyer; I'm a-going to defend him ag'in' this 'ere charge."

"You the prisoner's lawyer?" exclaimed the alcalde, in astonishment.

"Sart'in! Don't you remember I told you that outside, when I put the injunction on that 'ere hanging business?"

"I'm a reg'lar old rustler of a lawyer, too, and don't you forgit it!"

"You're no lawyer!" the Mormon declared.

"Ain't I?" ejaculated the High Horse, in scornful tones. "Wa-al, now, I kin jest tell you w'ot it is, alcalde, I've practiced at more bars than I've got fingers and toes, and mighty successful, too, I've been, I kin tell you."

There was another snicker at this, even the majority of the Mormons joining in the laugh.

By his cool, off-hand manner the stranger had made a most decided impression.

"I don't ax for a single thing that ain't fair, squar' and above-board," Goldlace continued. "I don't play with no cards up my sleeve, nor down in my boots; 'cold deal' I despise, and I wouldn't run in no 'brace' in any game I war a-playing for all the gold that has ever been dug out of Californy, and that's the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

A slight murmur of applause arose from the audience. Above all things else the average Western American prides himself on his love for fair play.

"A fair field, no favor, and may the best man win!" has always been the miner's motto.

"This hyer man is on trial for his life," and the High Horse pointed with his finger at the schoolmaster, who sat in his chair as composed as though the part of a spectator was all he expected to play in the scene.

"Now then, alcalde, I put it to you, fair and squar', ain't you going to give him no show, no-how?"

"Certainly—certainly!" the Mormon elder hastened to reply, knowing that it was necessary for the semblance of justice to appear in the trial, although he had made up his mind to railroad the schoolmaster out of the town with as little ceremony as possible.

"Oh, yes; all I want to get at is the truth, you know."

"That's the p'int!" cried Goldlace, bringing his hands together with a vigorous slap, the crack of which sounded like the report of a revolver; "that's jest w'ot we are getting arter—the truth, you, bet!"

"Certainly; the young man shall have the fairest kind of a trial. I will say right hyer that thar woa't be a man in the town who will be more pleased than a gent about my size if he succeeds in gitting off," the alcalde declared.

"Now, you are talking like a Dutch uncle, and it does you proud," the High Horse ejaculated. "So drive on your go-cart, Mister Alcalde!"

"Schoolmaster, you are accused—"

But at this point the Mormon elder was interrupted by Goldlace, who jumped to his feet and exclaimed:

"See hyer, alcalde; I rise to suggest that you call the critter by his name. Schoolmaster ain't no name for a decent white man, you know."

"An oversight on my part," replied the officer, annoyed by the correction more than he cared to show.

"I reckon so."

And with a broad grin on his face, and a nod to the audience, as much as to say: "You jest watch and see how straight I'll have this thing run!" the High Horse sat down.

"Martin Jarrilla, you are accused of the murder of—" began the alcalde again, but at this point the High Horse again leaped to his feet and interrupted the proceedings.

"Your honor, I beg your pardon for having to cut off your wind without any ceremony, but ain't you a-gittin' a leetle too fast in this hyer thing?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know 'bout that," replied the alcalde, in a sulky way.

He could hardly restrain his rage at being thus publicly taken to task by the cool and impudent stranger.

"Wa-al, I reckon you air. If I git hold of your say-so, you was going to ask the young cuss yonder whether he war guilty or not guilty."

"Yes, that was my intention," responded the alcalde, looking daggers at his questioner.

"And you hain't got any jury yit, ho, ho, ho!" and Goldlace roared at the absurdity of the thing.

"A jury?" muttered the Mormon elder.

"A jury, of course! You've got to have a jury when you try a man for his life, you know."

"Well, but Judge Lynch—"

"But, you ain't Judge Lynch, you know!" Goldlace cried quickly, taking the words out of the other's mouth; "you're an alcalde—an officer of a reg'lar court, and I never heerd tell on a case yit—and I've traveled a few, I reckon—where an alcalde kinder thought he was a king, or an emperor, or some other heathen big-bug, and went in for to run things himself without any regard to law."

"Oh, you've got to have a jury—twelve good men and true, and thar's no two ways 'bout it!"

The Mormon elder had sense enough to see that the stranger was in the right, and, although in his heart he cursed the man for daring to interfere, yet he pretended to be impressed by his words and said:

"I guess you are right about that; so, King Hiram, pick out twelve good men for the jury."

Goldlace had resumed his seat but was on his legs in an instant.

"No, no; you can't do it that way. The jury must be drawn by lot!" he announced.

CHAPTER X.

TALL SWEARING.

"STRANGER, it seems to me that you are mighty durned hard to please!" the alcalde cried, in a rage at being thus checked at every step.

"Tain't my fault if you don't know anything 'bout the law," Goldlace retorted. "Who ever heard of *one man* picking out a jury?" he continued in supreme contempt.

"Say, alcalde, for the love of Heaven, whar on airth were you raised?"

"That's none of your business," snarled the angry Mormon, now frightfully enraged at his tormentor and completely at a loss to answer him.

"Pick your jury out by lot! *that's* the way to do it, and no other jury is worth the wag of a brindled pup's bob-tail!" the High Horse declared. "Every man in the room who is a citizen has the right to a chance to go on the jury. The names ought to be written on pieces of paper, and then the papers put into a hat, and then drawn out one by one, and the first twelve are your jury, sure enough."

The alcalde knew that the speaker was right; and, after all, what did it matter except to take some of the responsibility from his shoulders?

There were some thirty odd men in the room, and of that number all were Mormons with the exception of six or seven, so the chances were that the jury would be nearly all saints, and if there were nine or ten Mormons to two or three Gentiles, he felt pretty sure that, if he threw the weight of his influence against the prisoner, the Gentiles on the jury would not dare to hold out against their Mormon comrades.

"All right; we'll choose a jury by lot, then. I want you all to understand that I'm going to give the prisoner the squarest kind of a deal; I'd

be ashamed for to try and ring in a *'cold deck'* on him."

Although the alcalde was a Mormon elder, yet that did not prevent him from being one of the biggest gamblers in the town, and the man who 'got away' with him at any short card game would have to be a card-sharp of the first water.

Tellers were appointed.

One by one the men in the room filed up and gave their names—every man asserting that he was a citizen, so none were barred out.

The names, as fast as they were given, were written on slips of paper, the slips folded and dropped into a hat.

When this ceremony was finished the alcalde asked: "Who will draw the names?"

"Tackle it yourself," suggested the High Horse. "Thar can't be any gum-game 'bout it, anyway, and of course *you* wouldn't try to make that raffle if thar was," and he winked at the spectators as much as to say:

"Watch how I feed him with taffy."

The alcalde drew out a slip of paper, opened it and read the name aloud—"Ben Franklin!" he said, and from the sparkle in the alcalde's eyes, the High Horse, who was watching the face of the official intently, guessed that jurymen number one was a Mormon.

"Step up, B. Franklin, Esquire, and squat on the boxes on the platform yonder!" said Goldlace.

There was a row of boxes on the left-hand side of the platform against the wall, which the High Horse saw would answer admirably for a jury "box."

The namesake of the great philosopher came shambling forward—a hang-dog-looking rascal, and if the old printer was privileged to look down from his abode in the realm of the blessed, he must have had a strong desire to strangle the miserable wretch who so disgraced an honored name.

Slip number two came out.

"Tom Breckenridge!"

The alcalde scowled, and the High Horse guessed that a Gentile had been elected, and he was highly pleased, too, when the owner of the name advanced, and he perceived it was the old miner whose acquaintance he had made.

"Thar's one good man and true if the other is a worthless cuss," was his thought.

Out came another slip.

"Bill Sharply!"

This worthy advanced with a swagger and grinned at Goldlace as he passed.

"Going to have another chance to put the rope around his neck, ain't ye?" Goldlace remarked, as the fellow ascended the platform.

"Alcalde, I reckon I ought to kick like a mule ag'in' that cuss, but I reckon the case will be so clear that even Ugly Bill will have to come up to the rack and take his fodder like a man."

The next man drawn was a Gentile, much to the alcalde's disgust; then came two Mormons and then four outsiders, all in a heap, and it so happened that when the drawing was finished the jury was evenly divided—there being six Mormons and six Gentiles upon it.

"It really looks as if my cake was going to be all dough," the alcalde muttered, as he surveyed the twelve men, and realized that the Mormons were not in the majority.

"Now then, we're ready to go ahead," Goldlace announced.

As the first witness—Michael Cardiff—stepped forward and told a rambling, disconnected story of how, between one and two o'clock, he was walking down the street and had encountered the schoolmaster, who immediately darted out of sight when he was encountered, and shortly after, he met Yellow John, with whom he exchanged a few words. Then Yellow John went in the same direction that the schoolmaster had taken. A few minutes afterward the sound of a slight noise, seemingly like a scuffle had come to his ears, but he paid no attention to it, thinking it amounted to nothing, and it was not until he had ascertained the facts in regard to the death of Yellow John, in the morning, that he came to have the suspicion that the schoolmaster had anything to do with the tragedy.

It was a lame and impotent yarn, but not until the man delivered it did the Mormon elder realize what a stupid thing it was to attempt to convict a man of murder on such testimony.

But then the alcalde had calculated upon the thing going through "with a hurrah," as the saying is. He had expected, on the strength of Sailor Mike's statement, to raise the cry "the schoolmaster is the murderer!" and then run him out of the camp before any one could take the trouble to look carefully into the matter.

The disgusted and disconcerted alcalde, with a hope of strengthening Mike's testimony and explaining some discrepancies in his tale, put a few questions to him, but the rough was not a good hand at this sort of thing; he did not have a particularly good memory, and, as the story was a lie from beginning to end, not having any basis of truth to fall back on, he soon became involved in contradictions that it was plain, even to the meanest intelligence, the fellow's yarn was made out of "whole cloth"—no truth in it.

In despair the alcalde said he was through, and in his heart he cursed not only the stupidity of the wretch, but his own want of sagacity in

pinning his faith upon such an unreliable scoundrel.

Then the High Horse took the witness in hand.

"Tain't worth while to waste words on this champion liar," he remarked, as he rose to his feet, in a tone as if conversing with himself, yet loud enough to be heard by all in the apartment, "but I'll have to grind him to pieces jest to show the folks w'ot kind of a p'ison skunk he is, anyway."

Sailor Mike glared in defiance at the stranger as he listened to the sweeping accusation; this was not what he had bargained for at all; it was the schoolmaster who was to be tried not he.

"Your name is w'ot?" Goldlace demanded, fixing his eyes upon the witness's face in a very suspicious way.

"Michael Cardiff."

"Anything else?"

"Sailor Mike."

"Oh, you've been a sailor?"

"Yes."

"Are you one of those sea liars that I've heard tell on?"

"No more liar than you are!" retorted Mike, fiercely.

"Wa-al, if you kin throw the truth as heftily as I kin, you'll pass in a crowd, I kin tell you. And now you've a chance to make a clean breast of it. Why did you kill Yellow John?"

CHAPTER XI.

COMING TO THE VERDICT.

ALL within the apartment were amazed at the accusation, for this was a turn in the tide of affairs that no one of them had dreamed of.

Goldlace, as he uttered the words, which were pronounced in the most solemn manner, shook his finger warningly at the witness, who was so astounded for a moment that he hardly knew what to say.

"W'ot's that?" he stammered at last. "Do you mean for to say that I killed the man?"

"Sart'ini! as sure as you're born!" the High Horse responded.

"In trying to sw'ar to a lie so as to fix the guilt on another man, you've come pretty nigh letting the cat out of the bag, but now go on and make a clean breast of it. According to your own testimony you were the last man to see Yellow John alive; you allow you met him between one and two o'clock and spoke to him; nobody else saw him arter he left the hotel to go home, so it's evident, according to your own story, that you were the last man to see him alive, and of course that war the time you stuck him."

"It's a lie—an infernal lie!" roared the witness, in a rage, for he began to fear that he had got himself into a trap.

"No lie in it. Whar did you go after leaving Yellow John?" demanded Goldlace, abruptly.

"Home to my own shanty."

"And you went to sleep thar?"

"I did."

"And slept thar until morning?"

"Right you air! I slept thar until morning."

"Then you didn't turn in, like a drunken hog as you were, in the shed at the back of Long Tom Breckenridge's cabin about twelve o'clock last night and sleep thar until you was h'isted out 'bout six this morning?" the High Horse demanded, sharply.

The witness saw that he was in the toils, and for the life of him didn't comprehend how he could get out of it.

He had been so much under the influence of liquor on the night before that his memory of what had happened was not as good as it might be.

He had a dim recollection of going to sleep under the shed, being so full of the potent tanglefoot as to be incapable of reaching his own domicile, and acting on the sailor's motto, "Any port in a storm," had sought the shelter of the shed.

How many saw him lie down he couldn't for the life of him remember, but it was his impression that there were quite a number, and he was certain there were half a dozen of the miners in the neighborhood when he awoke in the morning.

So there wasn't the least use for him to attempt to deny the facts, and the only course left was to explain as well as possible.

"Oh, yes; I'll admit I had a full cargo aboard, and I came to anchor under the shed, but I only laid there for 'bout an hour; then, being troubled with a big thirst, I got up and sailed toward the hotel for to see if I couldn't get a drink to wet my whistle, but as it was closed up tight, I went down to the river and got some water instead, and that was how I met Yellow John."

"And arter you parted from him what did you do?"

"Went back to the shed and laid down for another snooze," replied the man with an impudent grin.

In his conceit he thought he had made a satisfactory explanation and got out of the tight place in which he had so unexpectedly found himself, with flying colors.

"Why didn't you make this statement in the first place?" Goldlace asked; "when you told

your story you never said a word about going to sleep, anyhow; on the contrary you said you were a-walking up and down meditating, when you run across the schoolmaster and Yellow John."

"Well, the thing clean slipped out of my memory."

"I reckon it did," Goldlace retorted, scornfully. "Wa-al, your honor," he said, addressing the alcalde, "I don't think it's worth while to take up any more time with this case; there ain't a shadow of proof against the prisoner, even s'posing every word this cuss has uttered is the truth," and he indicated Sailor Mike with his forefinger as he spoke.

"But I don't believe thar's a man in the room but w'ot kin see it's a yarn from beginning to end, without the taste of truth in it; so, as the thing is clear, let the jury tackle it."

The alcalde saw there was no chance of improving the matter. The scheme was sure to miscarry unless the jury could be induced to give a verdict directly opposite to the weight of the evidence.

The Mormon members of the jury were all right, and the elder felt that they could be trusted to render a verdict in accordance with his wishes without regard for the testimony; but the six Gentiles bothered him; that they were likely to be ugly and refuse to be guided by the others was more than probable.

There was no help for it, though, as far as the elder could see. He had done the best he could under the circumstances, and if he failed, all he could do was to try again, hoping for better luck next time.

"Gentlemen of the jury, jest put your heads together and see what you kin make of this hyer thing," the alcalde said.

"In course, if you think the schoolmaster is guilty of the murder of Yellow John, you are bound to put him through; but, if you think there is a doubt 'bout the matter, and it ain't clear to your minds that he did kill the man, the best thing you kin do is to warn him to quietly leave town and go to some other camp, 'cause it won't be pleasant for him to live hyer with a shadow like this hyer accusation hanging over him."

The High Horse perceived the alcalde's game now; it was perfectly apparent to the prisoner, also, and he smiled, contemptuously.

"Gentlemen of the jury!" the schoolmaster cried, "if I'm guilty it is your duty to find me guilty, and that means I will have a chance to stretch hemp; but if your verdict is 'not guilty,' I reckon I'm no coward to run away from a camp just because a drunken idiot takes it into his head to accuse me of a foul murder."

"If you git out of this hyer thing, I'll make you eat those words!" yelled Sailor Mike, in a rage, and shaking his clinched fist at the prisoner; "I'm no more a drunken idiot than you are, you white-handed milksop!"

The speaker thought it perfectly safe to threaten the young miner, for never since his arrival in the camp had he been concerned in any personal difficulty, and it was generally believed if he got into trouble and was cornered he would be certain to show the white feather.

A smile of contempt came over the pale face of the prisoner as he listened to the threatening words, but he did not trouble himself to make a reply, and this the majority of the audience present took to indicate that he was not anxious to provoke Sailor Mike to an encounter.

"You needn't attempt to instruct the jury, young man," the alcalde declared, with a great show of dignity; "they know their business, I reckon, as well as you do. It's all a matter of opinion, of course, but if you succeed in getting out of this hyer thing it will only be by the skin of your teeth, and I should really think that, after such a narrow squeeze, you would be glad to git out and go to some other camp, whar the folks wouldn't know that you had been suspicioned of being a murderer."

"Alcalde, I reckon you've got the wrong idea about the thing," the young man rejoined, speaking quietly and yet with determination. "Because I have been unjustly accused is no reason, according to my mind, why I should quit the camp and go off somewhere else. There isn't one atom of reason in this absurd and malicious charge, and, as far as any proof goes, you yourself might as well be accused of doing the deed as I."

"The accusation is ridiculous on the face of it. I was in my cabin last night at ten o'clock, and was abed and asleep by twelve. As it happens I haven't any witnesses to prove the fact, for I hadn't any visitors last evening, but I defy you to produce a soul who saw me abroad after I left the hotel a little before ten last night. I went straight to my cabin, and straight to bed, and as I had been working hard all day, I overslept myself and did not get up until late. That's the truth and I defy anybody to prove anything to the contrary!"

"As for the story told by this low-browed ruffian here, in regard to meeting me prowling around town about midnight, all I can say is that it's a lie from beginning to end and such a lie as only a stupid fool would invent."

Again Sailor Mike shook his fist at the young miner and muttered dire threats of what he would do in the time to come.

"Thar's been talk enuff, I reckon!" the alcalde declared. "Go for your verdict, gentlemen of the jury."

The twelve men put their heads together.

The betting among the audience was two to one that the prisoner would be acquitted.

CHAPTER XII.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

ALL within the apartment watched the actions of the jurymen with great interest.

The twelve had retired to the further end of the platform to deliberate, and it was apparent, from the beginning, that the twelve were not going to agree.

Gradually the Mormons clustered together, leaving the Gentiles in a throng, and from that action the wise-heads among the lookers-on guessed the jury were going to stand six to six.

The twelve men did not deliberate over five minutes; then the Mormon, Sharp Bill, who, as the reader will remember, was the individual anxious to hang the young miner, exclaimed:

"Durn me if I ever see'd sich a contrary set of galoots in my life. I say he's guilty and no mistake!"

The alcalde was quick to catch at the word.

"Guilty, gentlemen of the jury—is that your verdict?"

"No, no!" cried the Gentiles in a breath.

"Yes, yes!" chorused the Mormons.

The elder pretended to be puzzled.

"What's the matter, gentlemen, can't you agree?"

"Nary time!" responded Long Tom Breckenridge. "Me and my pards hyer," and he indicated the five other Gentiles who were clustered around him, "don't take no stock in the schoolmaster's guilt nohow, noway. We don't think thar is the least mite of proof ag'in' him, and we all votes not guilty—the hull on us."

"We ain't that way o' thinkin' at all!" Sharp Bill exclaimed. "Me and my pards hyer think thar ain't no doubt 'bout his guilt. He killed the man and he ought for to be hung, and the quicker the better, so say we all of us!"

The elder was in a quandary. With six of the jury clamoring for an acquittal, he did not see how the trick he had planned could be worked.

"You see, schoolmaster," he said, addressing the prisoner, "how matters stand. You make a great row about your innocence, but hyer's half of the jury who don't take any stock in it, and they want you hanged because they are satisfied you killed the man."

"I shouldn't think you would want to live in a town where the most of the people hold such an opinion of you. Why, I'll bet all I'm worth, if the question of guilt or innocence was put to the vote, right hyer now, that a big majority would vote you guilty, as I own to you frankly I do."

"Hold up your hands, all you that agree with me and think the schoolmaster ought to git up and dust."

The alcalde was right in his conjecture; a large majority of the audience sided with him.

All of the low and ignorant "saints" did not dare to go against his expressed will.

"You see," the elder continued, after the show of hands had been made, "the town is dead ag'in' you, schoolmaster, and you had better take the hint like a sensible man and git out."

"Why, that would be to acknowledge myself guilty!" the young miner cried, indignantly. "Oh, no, alcalde, you mustn't think I can be driven out of town in this way, because the trick can't be worked."

"I'm sorry that the majority of the men among whom I live have a bad opinion of me, but that is my misfortune, not my fault. It is possible that in time they may have reason to change their opinion; but one thing is certain—I'm not going to sneak away like a coward."

The inhabitants of the Bar were amazed at the bold stand taken by the young man; they had not given him credit for pluck; but, now that the alcalde discovered his mistake, he realized more and more the necessity for getting him out of the town.

"This hyer thing is as plain as the nose on your face!" the High Horse now interposed. He had been silent for quite a while, watching events develop themselves. "As long as the jury can't agree that is the same as an acquittal, so all you kin do is to discharge the prisoner and dismiss the case."

"No, no! Six of the jury think he is guilty!" demurred the alcalde, still hoping to get an "under grip" on the miner.

"Go 'long! W'ot difference does that make in any court? Law's law, an' don't ye forgit it!" Goldlace averred. "Even if thar was eleven of them w'ot believed he was guilty and the twelfth man hung out, that would be enough to dismiss the charge."

Then a bright idea suddenly occurred to the High Horse.

"I tell you w'ot it is, alcalde, I've thought of a way to settle this hyer thing, since you ain't willing for to settle it the way it ought to be fixed. Let's decide it by trial of battle."

The alcalde looked amazed and the rest stared in astonishment.

"What do you mean? I don't think I understand you exactly," the elder exclaimed.

"It's going back to first principles, you know, deciding a feller's guilt or innocence by force of arms," the High Horse explained.

"Thar's six of the jury on one side and six on the other, so thar's an even match. You ain't quite so big as I am, alcalde, but I reckon from your looks that you are a heap of a warrior, so I'll take you for my mutton. The schoolmaster hyer kin tackle this lying whelp of a witness, and so we're all fixed. We kin go out into the street hyer and settle the thing right off the handle."

"What? Do you mean that we are all to fight each other?" demanded the astounded saint.

"That's it; you've hit it the first time, and no mistake. Trial by battle, you know," and Goldlace rubbed his hands together in glee.

"If we clean you out, and I reckon we kin do it as easy as rolling off a log, my pard hyer ain't guilty; but if you clean us out—and in my opinion it's dollars to cents that you can't—he's your mutton for to hang if you like."

"That suits me," the prisoner announced.

But it did not suit the alcalde, and, as he cast a glance at the muscular figure of the High Horse, he came to the conclusion that he didn't want any of it in his'n."

Some of the jurymen, too, were averse to the proposition, and lifted their voices in expostulation, much to the disgust of the audience, who were almost unanimously in favor of the novel mode of decision; such a rare show tickled their fancy amazingly.

Just then a counter idea occurred to the alcalde.

Sailor Mike had boastfully exclaimed that the suggestion was agreeable to him, so the wily elder spoke.

"That sort of business might do for the dark ages," he remarked, "but it won't work now. We ain't so flush of men in this town that we can afford to kill off a dozen or so of them at a lick, but if the schoolmaster and Sailor Mike hyer feel inclined to fight the thing out, I don't see any objection."

"Nary objection!" averred Goldlace.

"I'm the man for his money, at any time, any place, and I don't keer a continental wot the weepin is either!" the witness declared, arrogantly.

"It suits me," the young man responded; "and if I get the best of this scoundrel"—Mike scowled horribly at this—"it is understood that I am not to be troubled about this accusation any more?"

"Of course that is understood," the alcalde replied. "The fight settles the thing for good and all."

"How 'bout the choice of weepins?" Sailor Mike demanded. "How is that to be settled?"

"Toss up a dollar," Goldlace suggested. "And the man that wins the toss can have the choice of weapons."

"That's perfectly fair," the alcalde assented.

"All right," growled the ruffian.

"I'm satisfied," said the miner.

"I'll toss and you call, alcalde," remarked Goldlace. "If it goes ag'in' you then my man chooses."

"Yes, yes; up with it!"

The High Horse spun a silver dollar up in the air and caught it as it descended on his broad palm.

"Heads!" cried the elder.

"Heads it is!" replied Goldlace, as he examined the coin.

"Sailor, you kin choose the weepins," the alcalde decided, evidently delighted at this piece of luck, which he regarded as a good omen.

"The first trick is yourn pardner, and no mistake," the High Horse exclaimed.

"But don't go to building too much on that ere, you know, for as one swallow don't make a summer, neither does one trick make a game."

"You'll find, stranger, that it will come pretty near to it in this case," observed Sailor Mike, boastfully.

"I choose knives—bowie-knives, do you understand? and what chance do you think that fellar thar will have a-standing up ag'in' me in a knife fight?"

"A chance to be struck by Kentucky sour mash lightning, mebber," responded Goldlace, who never could resist the temptation to crack a joke.

"Come then, gents, let's adjourn!" the alcalde cried.

CHAPTER XIII.

KING HIRAM'S PRESENTIMENT.

EAGER with curiosity to witness the novel sight, all within the apartment hurried to the street.

The alcalde and King Hiram brought up the rear.

The elder seized upon the opportunity to exchange a few words with the ex-Danite.

"Things are working better than I expected," he remarked.

"Do you think so?" returned Buckingham, and from his tone it was plain he did not see matters in as favorable a light as the other.

"Oh, yes, no doubt 'bout it. I was afeard we was a-going to slip up on this catch, and we wouldn't be able to h'ist the galoot out of the camp; but Sailor Mike will settle his hash for him, for good and all."

"I don't feel so sure about that."

"You don't really think he stands any chance in a knife fight against such a man as Mike?"

"It's pretty hard to tell about such things sometimes," the other replied. "Mike is not a first-class man—no such man as Yellow John. I tell you, alcalde, we lost a treasure when John war laid out."

"I know it, I know it," with a melancholy shake of the saintly head.

"Mike is more of a blow-hard than anything else, and then he drinks too much whisky. He's soaked in sour mash about all the time, and a man who is risking his life upon his skill with his weapons must have his nerves in good order. In that respect this schoolmaster has a big advantage."

"Yes, of course; I am ready to admit that," the alcalde assented; "but that is the only advantage he possesses. The fellow may have pluck and steady nerves, but if he isn't used to difficulties of this kind, he is mighty apt to get rattled at the critical moment."

"Sailor Mike has been in a dozen such brawls; if he is to be believed, he has laid out at least a dozen men in a single fight."

"Oh, you can't take any stock in what such a blow-hard says," the other declared. "He may have succeeded in downing his man once or twice, and then again he may never have accomplished such a feat in his life."

"I'll bet you what you like that Mike uses him up without receiving a scratch!" the alcalde boastfully bantered.

"I'll go you a hundred on that," King Hiram replied. "I don't know exactly how it is, but I have a presentiment that this young fellow is destined to cause us a good deal of trouble."

"Do you think so?" Oakham asked, a little anxiously, for he had great faith in the wisdom of his companion.

"Yes, it's only a sort of feeling, you know. There isn't the least reason for it, as far as I can see, but commencing with to-day, every time I have looked at this schoolmaster, with his pale face, his white hands and his womanish look, a sort of chilly feeling crept over me, just the same sensation as when I encounter a snake—I feel sort of crawly, you know."

"That is odd," the elder observed, not exactly knowing what to make of the matter, for, of all men in the world, the ex-Danite was the least given to superstition.

"It is strange, and I cannot account for it, and I tell you what it is, elder, the feeling has taken such a hold upon me and made so great an impression, that a thousand dollars would be no temptation for me to take Sailor Mike's place in this hyer knife-fight."

"Is that so?" the other asked, in wonder.

"Yes, it is; there's been something the matter with me lately. For the last few nights I've been troubled with dreams that bring the cold sweat out all over. That bloody business in Utah keeps coming up in my mind."

A shiver shook the fat form of the elder, and he glanced nervously about him.

"My dear Hiram, don't for Heaven's sake, mention that matter again," he protested, his voice low and trembling. "That was years ago and by this time has been forgotten by everybody. Don't speak of it, I beg; you really un-hinge my nerves."

"I can't help speaking of it once in a while, elder, when the thing comes up in my mind. If I didn't speak of it, I reckon I might go mad. Yellow John had a hand in that affair, didn't he?"

"Yes, yes; but for goodness' sake drop it!" the Mormon begged.

"And if there is any truth in the stories that say there is a hereafter, where we'll have to answer for the deeds done in this world, by this time Yellow John has had to step up to the captain's office and settle for his share in that night's bloody work."

"Will you stop talking about it? You are putting my teeth all on edge!" the other declared.

"All right; I won't say anything more; but I tell you, I'd give half of the rest of my life, be it much or little, if I could wipe that record out."

"So would I—so would I!" cried the other, earnestly. "But it's past and gone; it's done; it can't be undone, and thar isn't the least use of our bothering our heads about it now."

By this time the combatants had halted, and were stripping for the fight.

On the way thither the High Horse had taken occasion to speak a few words to the young miner.

"Ever had much practice in the knife line?" he asked.

"No, not much."

"Wa-al, thar ain't much to it; don't waste any time in fooling; 'tain't like swords, you know; you're so near your man that you can't try any funny business."

"I suppose not."

"The only thing is after you get the knife in

your paw, and the word 'Go!' is given, let him have the steel for all you're worth and quicker than lightning. 'Tain't so much wot you call science as to git in the first lick and then jump back out of danger. You're tolerably spry, I take it, and that gives you a big advantage."

"Be assured I will not lose time after getting the word," the young miner replied, and the High Horse was delighted to observe that he seemed to be not in the least affected by the near approach of this duel to the death.

The throng had proceeded toward the river, where there was a smooth open piece of land, covered with a fine green turf, exactly suited for the scene of such a contest.

News of the fight having spread like wildfire through the camp there wasn't a soul in the town able to be out who was not on or near the grounds.

The preparations for the duel were simple enough and soon made.

The crowd formed a ring without order, instinctively doing that which ought to be done.

From amid the numerous knives offered for use, the alcalde selected two so alike that no one could detect any difference.

One was bestowed upon each combatant, who, by this time was ready for the contest.

All that either did was to roll up the right sleeve of his flannel shirt and fasten it securely above the elbow.

Then, knife in hand, they faced each other.

The contrast between the two was great, for, while the schoolmaster was a little below the medium size, Sailor Mike was decidedly above it; yet there was something in the small but sinewy arm which the young miner displayed, and in his graceful, well-knit figure which greatly pleased the High Horse.

"Durn me!" he muttered, communing with himself, "if the cuss ain't built like a prize-fighter right from the ground upward! He's one of those deceiving men wot don't look to be nearly as big as they are. A feller would be apt to pick him out for a light weight, but, I'm open to bet anybody a hoss that he'll weigh a good hundred and fifty pounds, all solid bone, flesh, muscle, and nary fat."

Hardly had Goldlace finished these reflections when the alcalde cried:

"Are you ready now?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RESULT.

"ALL ready," responded the schoolmaster.

"Ay, ay, ready it is!" exclaimed Sailor Mike, both his tone and manner betraying that he hadn't the least fear in regard to the issue.

"Go it, then!" cried the alcalde.

For a moment the lookers-on seemed to hold their breath, so anxious were they not to miss a single detail of the affair.

The two men stood facing each other, about three yards apart, and from the difference in their sizes, as the confident Sharp Bill remarked to a brother Mormon who stood by his side:

"It's a horse to a hen that Sailor Mike splits him in two at the first lick!"

The party addressed nodded.

He hadn't the least doubt that the Mormon champion would do the trick; in fact all the "saints" felt positive on this point, and even the Gentiles were afraid that the slenderly-built schoolmaster stood but little chance of winning or even holding his own in the seemingly unequal contest.

Two persons only were there on the ground who believed that the young miner was not rushing to certain death when he agreed to meet the Mormon bully and desperado in a knife fight.

But the opinions of those two men in reality were worth all the rest besides, for they were sharps who had seen a great deal of this sort of thing and were no greenhorns in the use of a bowie-knife.

The two to whom we refer were the ex-Danite, King Hiram Buckingham and Gideon Goldlace, the High Horse of the Pacific.

As the reader has seen the ex-Danite had confessed to having a secret, instinctive fear of the young man, a fear that he could not account for nor reason with, and then too, gazing at the antagonists as they stood facing each other, with the eye of experience, he saw that the Gentile was much lighter on his feet and a quicker man in every way than his opponent.

And he handled the knife too as though the use of such a weapon was not strange to him.

"My life against the scalp of a prairie wolf that Sailor Mike has caught a Tartar!" he murmured as the alcalde gave the signal for the contest to begin.

And the High Horse, surveying the scene with his keen, experienced eyes, so full of judgment, came to exactly the same opinion.

"Durn me if the young galoot ain't got a spring to him like a prize-fighter," he muttered, "while t'other feller stands upon his pins as clumsily as a wooden man."

"Oh, wouldn't it be a rich joke if this hyer Gentile David should upset the apple-cart of this Mormon Goliath."

"Such things has happened and plenty of them since the days of them old Bible sharps."

"If the big cuss should git salivated this thief

of an alcalde will feel mad enough for to kick himself all over the town."

With a smile full of confidence upon his ugly, brutal face, Sailor Mike took a few steps toward his antagonist, who, with a sober face, but with a demonic light sparkling in his dark eyes, awaited his coming.

The antagonists were within a yard of each other and then—

Well, in speaking about the matter afterward, there were two people among the lookers-on, who agreed in their account of it, for the whole thing happened so quickly that it was all over before the bystanders comprehended that there was any mischief.

As Long Tom Breckenridge remarked in speaking of the matter:

"You may talk 'bout lightning being quick all you like, boys, but if that feller for quickness didn't beat any bit of lightning that my two eyes ever took in since I opened them on this hyer footstool, then you can take my head for a football, and I don't keer a durn how soon you do it, either."

Let us relate how the affair appeared to the Mormon bully, who, being one of the actors in the scene ought to have known how it all came about as well, if not better, than anything else.

Anticipating an easy victory, for the idea had never entered his head that his antagonist stood the least bit of chance at all, he approached him with the most confident manner in the world.

His plan of operations was to make a feint at his opponent's head, and then, when the young man naturally threw up his blade to guard against the threatened stroke, to bury his weapon deep in the breast of the Gentile.

He never got a chance to carry out this plan, for just as soon as he got within a yard of the schoolmaster, the other sprung forward with the vigor, skill and ferocity of a tiger.

There was a flash of the long, bright blade before the eyes of the Mormon.

Instinctively he recoiled, and then he felt a sharp, shooting pain in his right arm, so intense, so excruciating that it drew from his lips a howl of pain.

The knife dropped from his nerveless grasp.

He staggered back with a torrent of curses, his right arm hanging powerless by his side, with the crimson life-tide rushing from it.

Then, overcome by the wound, he sunk in a swoon, moaning, to the earth.

The schoolmaster, with a single slash of his keen blade, which he, seemingly, handled with the same skill that the fencing master does his deadly rapier, had laid the right arm of the bully open from the wrist to the elbow.

Sailor Mike was maimed for life.

A long breath came from the lips of the spectators when they realized that the bowie-knife fight was ended almost before it had begun.

The alcalde could not restrain from expressing his amazement.

He and King Hiram stood a little apart from the rest, and the elder cried:

"Did you ever see such a thing in all your life? How did he do it?"

"Simply by being the quicker and better man of the two," the ex-Danite replied.

"Didn't I tell you that this man was dangerous? I felt it in my bones. My presentiments rarely deceive me, and you can bet your bottom dollar, alcalde, that this man is going to give you more trouble than any fellow you ever attempted to climb."

"I'll down him though—I'll down him if I have to wipe out every Gentile in the town!" the Mormon elder replied, fiercely.

These few words had been rapidly exchanged, and as the alcalde finished the speech the schoolmaster, who saw that his antagonist had fainted and that there wasn't any danger of his coming to the "scratch" again, as one of the bystanders phrased it, cried out:

"Judgment, alcalde; is the fight mine or not?"

"Examine Mike, some of you," responded the official, with an ill grace.

All the bystanders in a body, with the exception of the High Horse, the Mormon elder, and King Hiram, made a rush toward the fallen man, whereon Goldlace felt called upon to interfere.

"W'ot are you 'bout?" he yelled; "do you want to kill the critter by surrounding him so that he won't be able to get a breath of fresh air?"

"Stand back and give the man a chance for his life, and if thar's any sharp hyer w'ot is a traveling doctor's shop let him take a squint at the galoot."

There was a tone of command in the voice of the stranger that seemed to enforce obedience.

The men fell back, and there was a cry for "Doc Provo."

As the High Horse had anticipated, there was a man in the camp who was known to possess some medical skill.

Doc Provo, a slender, rather elderly man, with a red face and a dissipated air, knelt by the side of the wounded man, and proceeded to examine his hurt.

This personage was a Mormon, and had been one of the first settlers in the district.

He possessed a great deal of medical knowledge, as he had amply proved on sundry occasions, and no one in the camp doubted the statement, which he was wont to make when he got under the influence of liquor and became talkative, that at one time he held a good position as a physician in the East, and was in possession of a lucrative practice.

"Wine and women have been my ruin!" was the declaration with which he generally wound up his maudlin disclosures, "but life is short, let us make it sweet and enjoy the passing hour. Fill 'em up again, old time rocks!" This invocation addressed to the barkeeper.

"Bring me something to bandage his arm as quickly as you can, or the man will bleed to death!" the doctor declared.

One of the miners who happened to have under his arm a few yards of cotton cloth which he had just purchased was generous enough to donate it for the use of the wounded man.

The physician carefully bound up the injured arm, working with the celerity due to long practice.

"How is he? is the wound mortal?" asked the Mormon elder.

"Oh, no, not if he has proper care; but his career as a fighting man is ended, unless he learns to handle his weapons with his left hand."

"This arm will never be any good to him as long as he lives."

"Then the fight is mine!" the schoolmaster said.

"Yes, I reckon you've come out on the top of the heap this time," the alcalde admitted, reluctantly.

"And am I a free man—am I purged from this charge of murder?"

"Oh, yes, that was the understanding; but if you'll take my advice you'll quit this camp," the Mormon elder warned.

"No, no, I'm not going to be driven out like a dog. I've as much right here as any man, and I intend to stay."

The Mormons looked amazed at this announcement, which of course pleased the Gentiles. The schoolmaster was now a hero in their eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

MORE OF THE IRON DAGGER.

THE "picnic" being over the crowd dispersed. Long Tom Breckenridge, as the representative of the Gentiles, insisted on the schoolmaster and the High Horse coming to the hotel with him and having a "bowl" at his expense.

As he justly observed:

"It's a big day for this hyer camp when a free white man is able to get the best of these Mormon galoots!"

The young miner had warmly expressed his thanks to the stranger for the great service which he had rendered, for he understood well enough that had it not been for Goldlace's prompt action in coming so timely to his rescue the chances were great that he would have been in the other world by this time, lynched by the Mormon rabble.

The Gentiles all marched in a body to the hotel, while the Mormons, crestfallen by the unexpected and summary defeat of their champion, scattered to attend to their avocations.

The alcalde and King Hiram repaired to the office of the Mormon elder to consult as to what should be done, for both anticipated that there was trouble ahead.

The wounded man was removed to his cabin under the doctor's direction, and he promised the alcalde to do all in his power for him.

Again the camp resumed its natural and normal appearance.

At the hotel the meeting between the High Horse and Dutch Jake made the bystanders roar with laughter.

The honest Dutchman was delighted to see his former acquaintance, and expressed it in even worse English than usual.

"If you're so glad to see me, s'pose you set 'em up for the boys," Goldlace suggested, with a wink at the rest.

"Nein, I cannot me afford dot oxpense, but, mine friend, I dells you vot I does. I shakes mit you for der drinks."

The Gentiles had a jolly time before the party broke up, and they came to a quiet agreement among themselves to stand by each other against the Mormons, if the saints attempted to put on any "frills."

Now we will let Old Father Time make a one-day leap ahead, and come to the return of the two, Soapy Sam and the English blacksmith, who had been stopped and despoiled by the strangely-disguised road-agent on Lone Mountain.

They went straight to the alcalde and told their tale, to which he listened in astonishment.

"A mighty bold thing," he remarked, "and if I thought it was any use I'd send out a posse and see if I could hunt the feller down, but the chances are that he'd be a hundred miles away by this time."

And this was all the satisfaction the two obtained.

Of course they couldn't blame the alcalde, for they knew he was speaking sense.

To hunt for a road-agent in the broken country around Lone Mountain with any posse short of a regiment would be about as foolish as the traditional exploit of hunting for a needle in a bundle of hay.

The news of the proximity of the road-agent created a deal of talk, for this was the first thing of the kind that had ever occurred in the neighborhood.

"The camp is kinder putting on metropolitan airs, with knife-fights, road-agents, and sich like," was the universal comment.

Yes, there wasn't any mistake about it, the town was getting "lively."

But that night about ten o'clock the camp had fresh cause for talk.

About all the male citizens of the place were gathered in and around the hotel and store, discussing matters and things in general, when a disreputable fat man, foot-sore and weary, with his soiled clothes covered with dust, made his appearance, marching into the bar-room of the hotel.

He had a fat, unmeaning face, tightly-cropped hair, and a little tuft of chin-whiskers, about the size of a dollar in circumference gave him a decided resemblance to a "billy-goat."

The moment he caught sight of Dutch Jake presiding behind the bar, he gave a theatrical start and uttered a loud cry:

"Do me eyes deceive me, ha, ha!"

Jake, on his part, jumped also, but it was with alarm.

As he afterward explained:

"I t'inks me, mebbe, dot was a loose lunatic asylum!"

"No, no, I see aright—it is my dear old pard. Dutch Jake, how are you?"

And rushing forward, the tramp, for such he appeared to be, seized the hand of the Dutchman and wrung it until tears came into the innkeeper's eyes.

"Sapperment! let go dot hand!" Dutch Jake howled. "Vat for you makes mit me such foolishness?"

There was a bottle of whisky and a glass on the counter which the Dutchman had just placed there in answer to a customer's demand.

The tramp seized upon the whisky bottle, filled the glass full to the very brim of the potent liquor and tossed it off at a single swallow.

The men of Babylon watched this performance with intense earnestness.

The camp had some pretty hard drinkers within its confines, but the lookers-on doubted if there was a man in the town who in the drinking line would not find in the stranger a foeman worthy of his steel.

"Vere ish der monish?" cried the Dutchman, recovering from his astonishment, as he watched the liquor disappear down the throat of the thirsty man, and then saw him grab the bottle as if with the intention of filling out another glass.

One was bad enough, and the Dutchman couldn't stand two, so with great promptitude he also grabbed the bottle.

"Charge it—charge it, Jakey, my boy, put it on your slate, and be certain to remind me of it next Tuesday and I will settle, sure!" responded the other.

The host relinquished his hold on the bottle and staggered back.

He thought he had seen the other somewhere, but now he was sure.

The stranger took advantage of the landlord's confusion to stow away another glass of the powerful bug-juice.

"By chiminety! it ish der Major Bum!"

And in truth it was the worthy major, in person, come to seek new fields and pastures green in this remote region.

"Right you are for a thousand pounds!"

And the veteran made another dive for the Dutchman's hand, but Jake had "been thar" once, and he didn't want any more of it, so he got out of the way.

The readers of the tale entitled "The High Horse of the Pacific" will doubtless remember that Major Bungartner, or Major Bum, as he was usually termed, and the honest Dutchman were great friends after a fashion.

The major lived at the expense of the innkeeper, who daily made oath that he would never trust the veteran for another cent's worth and then swallowed the major's "ghost stories" and set up the refreshments as usual.

"Jakey, I must say it does me proud to see you hyer and looking so well!" exclaimed the major, in his most affectionate tones.

"And such a fine place, too, equal to anything I've struck in my travels lately."

And the veteran gazed around him with a critical eye.

Then he leaned over the bar and whispered to the host.

"Glad that you're fixed so well, Jake, 'cos I want you to accommodate me for a few days until I hunt up a man in this region who owes me a couple of thousand."

"Hafe you got der cash?"

And the Dutchman leaned over the bar and winked mysteriously, as much as to say that he did business on a solid basis now.

"That's all right—next Tuesday; don't forget to remind me," returned the veteran, equally mysteriously.

"I'm on a big thing hyer—got the documents hyer now," and he tapped his breast. "I'll let you in for a share of it, if you like. Inside of a month I shall be rolling in wealth!"

The old charm was still potent; the Dutchman took in the "ghost story" as usual, and nodded and winked confidentially, as if he believed every word of it.

"By the way, gents, I had a strange adventure to-night just on the edge of your camp," the major said, addressing the crowd. "I was stopped by a road-agent."

"A road-agent!"

The exclamation came from the lips of almost everybody in the room, and the closest attention was secured for the speaker.

"Yes, gents, a sure enough road-agent," replied the major, "and though since my sojourn west of the Mississippi I have had the fortune, or misfortune, as it generally was, to make the acquaintance of quite a number of the tribe, this fellow to-night just double-discounted any specimen of the kind that I ever ran across."

"What was he like?" one of the bystanders inquired.

"A fellow about seven feet high, I should judge, dressed all in white, with a lamp on his head."

The listeners started at the description, and nearly every eye in the room was turned to where Soapy Sam and the Englishman, Golightly, sat on some barrels, side by side.

"Just right on the outskirts of your town, gents," the major continued.

"I was coming up the river from Claremont, and the night is pretty tolerable dark, you know, for the moon is new and doesn't rise until late."

"I saw the lights of the town, and hurried on, anxious to get a drink, for my mouth was as dry as a dust heap."

"And just as I came to an old, deserted shanty, which stands by the road about half a mile out, I should judge—"

"Just half a mile!" cried two or three in chorus.

"I saw the strangest thing I ever beheld."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAJOR'S STORY.

EVERY eye in the room was now riveted upon the major, and every ear was open, eager to listen to the story.

"Yes, sir, gentlemen, I say it, and I say it boldly, the strangest thing I ever beheld!" the major repeated, in his most impressive tones, delighted at the discovery that he had made a great impression.

The veteran was quick to improve an opportunity of this kind.

"But, I swear, gentlemen, I've been through so much excitement and have done so much talking that my throat is as dry as a dust-heap."

"Jake, jest give me another little taste of whisky, will you?"

And the major put the request in a careless, off-hand way, just as if he felt certain that it would be instantly complied with.

But the Dutchman, despite the interest he took in the road-agent story, still had an eye to business, and he hesitated about producing the liquor, whereupon one of the miners, who was leaning on the counter, sung out:

"Oh, sling out the fluid, Jake, and I'll stand it this time."

"You do me proud!" exclaimed the major, with a grateful bow, and in his mind's eye he set down the young fellow, who had so freely volunteered the treat, as a man whose acquaintance he would cultivate as soon as possible.

After refreshing himself with a generous draught of the fiery fluid, the major proceeded with his tale.

"Yes, gentlemen, it is a sure enough fact!" he declared. "It was the strangest sight I ever seen, and yet I have sojourned some time in this vale of tears and have witnessed some strange scenes in my time."

"I was late in making the town, although I am about as good a walker as you kin scare up, yet when every ten miles turns out to be fifteen or twenty it kinder knocks a man's calculations endways."

"Well, as I said, jest as I had 'bout come to the conclusion that I wouldn't be able to git to your burg until morning, and was thinking I had better spy out some snug hole in the bushes whar I could bunk for the night, I saw the lights of the town, and so I pulled myself together and set off like a race-horse."

"It was pretty dark, but the trail was distinct and I had no difficulty in keeping to it, with the lights ahead to guide me, and I went on until I came to the old shanty."

"I could just see it looming up in the darkness, and had come to the conclusion it was deserted, as no lights were visible, when, all of a sudden, a bright circle of light, about ten feet in diameter I should think, appeared on the side of the house."

"Well, gentlemen, I tell you the thing made me jump, it came so suddenly, jest like a flash of lightning, you know."

"I stood stock-still and stared and blinked at it, a-trying to make out what it was, for it upset me for the moment; being so odd, so queer, a complete puzzle, you know, and if I was a quinking man, gentlemen, I should really have delieved I had a touch of the jim-jams."

"Oh, der mans vot says dot you drinks ish making foolishness!" Dutch Jake declared, not able to allow this opportunity to give the major a shot to pass without improving it.

"Oh, no, you pour it down mit your throat!" and then the host indulged in a huge chuckle.

"I have to, Jake, when I drink such liquor as yours, or else the stuff would burn a hole in my windpipe," the veteran retorted.

But the miners were too interested in the recital to pay any attention to this poor exchange of wit, and a dozen voices exclaimed:

"Go on, go on!"

"You bet!" replied the major.

"Well, gentlemen, jest as I commenced to rub my eyes and ask what in thunder the durned thing meant, right in the center of the circle of light appeared a queer sort of an iron dagger and over it the inscription:

"Stand and deliver!"

"I was so much amazed at this new wrinkle that I blurted right out:

"Stand and deliver what? Durned if I've got anything!"

"Well, pards, it was jest like as if there was some spell about the thing and my speaking had busted it, for the light vanished immediately."

"I waited for a minute or two to see if it was coming back, and as it didn't I started up to the shanty to see if I could discover anything there."

"I hadn't taken three steps when a hoarse voice, right at my back, yelled out:

"Hold up your hands!"

"Gentlemen, I have been too long in this country to ever disregard a civil request such as one gentleman might make to another."

"Up went my hands instanter, and I sung out as I turned around:

"All right—don't shoot, but if you think you are going to make a stake out of me you have run foul of the wrong customer, unless you're a chap willing to skin a flea for his hide and tanner."

"By this time I had turned completely around. I knew, of course, what kind of a trap I had run into, but I didn't expect to see a road-agent got up after the outlandish fashion of this chap's rig."

"He looked to be about nine feet high, and he was dressed all in white, and on his head he had a sort of lantern."

"I never did take much stock in ghosts, or any such yarns, but I tell you, gentlemen, when I first set eyes on this fellow, durned if he didn't scare 'bout ten years' growth out of yours truly, to command."

"He had a revolver leveled at me, and when I came face to face with him he sung out:

"Shell out your plunder, and be quick about it!"

"Nary a thing have I got, unless you're hungry for a square meal and kin make out on crackers and cheese."

"You see, pards, I happened to be right down to the bed-rock—coming into town on my uppers, as it were, and I hadn't a copper to bless myself with, or anything else valuable, for that matter."

"Curse your crackers and cheese!" he yelled, gruff as a bear, you know."

"Is that all you've got?"

"All except the clothes I've got on, and I'll shuck them if you say so."

"What do you s'pose I want of your rags?" he cried.

"Don't know, but it's your say-so, and if you cry strip, I am your man."

"Turn out your pockets."

"I did it at once."

"No weapons?"

"Nary we'pon."

"Nice kind of a galoot you are to put a man to all this trouble for nothing," he grumbled, mad as a hornet, you bet yer boots!"

"Boss, next time you ketch me on the road I'll try to be well-beeled," I said.

"See that you do, for I am collecting toll on every trail out of Babylon Bar, and if the pilgrims that use the roads don't go well-beeled, thar'll be trouble now I tell ye; and, by the way, tell the boys at the Bar that I am going to pay 'em a visit pretty soon that will be apt to make them open their eyes."

There was a general exclamation of astonishment at this.

"That's what he said, gentlemen," the major declared.

"Then he told me to turn my back and not to dare to look around or to move for at least five minutes, or he would be under the disagreeable necessity of putting a hole right through me."

"I replied that I was a clean white man all the way through, and he needn't put himself to any trouble on my account, so I faced around and the cuss lit out, and he stole away so noiselessly that I couldn't hear a sound, but when, after a good five minutes—you can bet all your wealth, gentlemen, that I was careful not to

shorten the time any—I took a look back of me, nary hide nor hair of the critter could I see."

The bystanders looked at each other and exchanged significant glances when the veteran came to the end of his tale.

The major, a close observer, noticed these rather mysterious glances, and came to the conclusion that the truth of his story was questioned.

"Upon my word, gentlemen, I assure you I haven't stretched the yarn in the least," he hastened to assert.

"I know that it sounds like a ghost story, but it ain't; it's the Gospel truth, sure as you're born!"

"Oh, that's all right," Long Tom Breckenridge replied. "Tain't the first time that the galoot in white has made his appearance in this neighborhood, and he worked the trick just as you have described, hey, English?" and he turned to the blacksmith who sat by the side of Soapy Sam on the barrels.

Golightly had been nick-named English from the day of his arrival in the camp, and was seldom addressed in any other way.

"Yes, 'ang the fellow, he took every penny that I 'ad in my pockets," the blacksmith replied.

"Yes, he made a clean haul when he went through us, and no mistake," Soapy Sam asserted.

Then the conversation became general, each and every man present expressing his opinion on the subject, and finally all came to the conclusion that this bold marauder must be hunted down at any cost, or else he would be the ruin of the town, for no camp could be expected to prosper with such a vampire hovering upon its borders ready to prey upon its inhabitants.

Then somebody made a suggestion that it would be a good idea to look into the thing that very night, and it was received with the utmost favor.

Into the street the miners trooped, headed by the major, who was to act as guide.

By this time the moon was well up, and though its light was feeble, yet it was strong enough to enable the miners to make a discovery, as they marched down the street, which almost froze their blood with horror.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER VICTIM.

THE major was in the advance, while almost at his shoulder came Long Tom Breckenridge and Doc Provo.

Soapy Sam and Golightly were right behind, and following them came the rest of the party, ten in number.

All were well-armed, and although there was hardly a man in the party sanguine enough to imagine that any particular good would come of the trip, or that any important discoveries would be made, yet as they were all in the mood for such a picnic, they gladly sallied forth.

The veteran, being in the advance, was the first to make the discovery to which we have referred.

Right in the center of the street—right in the center of the town—lay a man, sprawled upon his back, with his white face upturned to the moon.

"Hello, there's a pilgrim who has fallen by the wayside!" exclaimed the major, calling the attention of the rest to the prostrate man, whom the veteran presumed to be overcome by liquor."

"This is a sad and awful warning, gentlemen, to steer clear of the alluring fiend who dwells in the potent fire-water, but as I'm proof against such weakness, don't throw your whisky away but save it for your uncle—Great heavens, boys, the man is dead!"

The sudden change in the tone was caused by the shrewd eyes of the veteran catching sight of a weapon buried in the breast of the stranger, and another glance at the pallid face of the man revealed the fact that the vital spark had fled.

The "picnic" party came to a sudden halt.

Every one stared at the dead body and afterward looked at each other in amazement.

Then, actuated by a common impulse, all hurried forward.

The man was dead, but the blow which had sapped the life away had been struck so recently that the body was still warm.

The man was no stranger to the miners, for he had been a member of the first party that had entered the valley.

He was a Mormon, and went by the name of Ben Purcell, although from his peculiar habits he was seldom called by his right appellation—that is if Ben Purcell was his right name, about which there was considerable doubt, for he was a desperado of the worst type, and sometimes, when under the influence of liquor, was wont to boast that in his time he had been the doer of many a bloody deed, and had been known by more names than he had fingers and toes.

The name by which the camp generally knew him was Old Solitary.

This was given him on account of the strange manner in which he acted.

He lived all alone in a little cabin away up in the foothills, and seemed to avoid the society of

the rest of the miners, seldom coming to town except for supplies.

He was often under the influence of liquor, but never drank in a sociable manner like the rest of the "boys," generally preferring to buy his "fire-water" in a bottle and carry it away that he might enjoy it in the solitude of his own cabin.

In person, Old Solitary was a six-footer, broad-shouldered, and muscularly built; a man big enough apparently to hold his own against a dozen ordinary foemen.

But the deadly blow had been dealt, and the Mormon brave, with all his crimes fresh upon his soul, had been called to the bar of the last dread tribunal.

Upon the doctor's judgment, of course, all the rest of the party relied, and all eyes were turned upon him after he finished his brief examination of the body.

"He's dead for keeps, gentlemen," he said. "The fellow that put the knife into him was no botch, I do know exactly where to strike, and had an arm strong enough to drive the blade home—and it ain't the first time we've seen his work either, for I reckon the fellow that laid Old Solitary out is the one that killed Yellow John, for hyer's another one of the iron daggers."

And with the word the doctor drew the instrument of death from the body of the murdered man and held it up so that all might see it.

Despite their hardihood a shudder shook the frames of the spectators as they looked upon the bloody blade of the instrument of death.

Then a strip of paper rolled tightly around the handle and tied with a thread so that it would not come off, caught the doctor's eyes.

"Hello! hyer's some sort of a communication, I reckon," he remarked, as he broke the thread and unrolled the paper.

The doctor was right in his conjecture, for upon the slip of paper, traced in reddish characters, so that it looked as though the pen had been dipped in blood, were the following lines:

"One by one are the guilty doomed to fall by the hand of the avenger—first the hirelings and then the masters."

The doctor read the communication aloud and the rest listened with intense amazement.

"What in thunder does it all mean, anyway?" Long Tom Breckenridge exclaimed, the first to break the silence.

The rest all shook their heads, with the exception of Soapy Sam, who looked unusually solemn, and glanced around him as though he expected to see the mysterious murderer peeping from behind some convenient hiding-place.

"Well, gentlemen, you kin count me out," the major remarked. "I ain't anxious to have anything to do with any such proceedings as this hyer. I'm a stranger to this camp, and if thar's going to be much of this hyer thing going on, I reckon I never will want to settle in these diggings."

Then the miners held a brief consultation and finally came to the conclusion that the alcalde ought to be informed of the tragedy as soon as possible.

Soapy Sam volunteered to carry the message, and the rest said they would remain by the body and keep watch until the alcalde arrived.

Away went the Mormon then in a great hurry, and at the alcalde's cabin, as he had expected, he found the elder and King Hiram.

Both were amazed and troubled as they listened to the tale.

"Strange, isn't it?" the Mormon elder remarked to King Hiram, when Soapy Sam had finished the recital.

"Yes," replied the other, his face dark and his manner gloomy.

"What do you suppose it means?"

"Before we attempt to determine that question we had better ascertain all we can about the matter," was Buckingham's reply.

The advice was good and the alcalde acted upon it.

The three hurried to the scene of the tragedy, and made a careful investigation, but were not able to discover anything beyond what they already knew.

Old Solitary had been attacked and killed right in the main street of the town, and with ample assistance within call.

A single cry of alarm from his lips would have brought a dozen to his aid.

But it was apparent that the deed had been done so quickly that the doomed man had had no opportunity to give an alarm.

He had evidently been taken by surprise, and so complete had it been that Old Solitary had not been afforded a chance to draw a weapon but had been stricken down with unarmed hands.

"I reckon we'll have to hold a meeting to-morrow and take the sense of the camp as to what had best be done," the Mormon elder remarked.

All present assented to this.

"So jest warn everybody you meet that there will be a gathering at my office to-morrow morning at eight o'clock to discuss this matter," the alcalde said.

Then at his direction the body was removed to one of the neighboring shanties, which chanced to be unoccupied, and the miners returned to the

hotel to indulge in a parting drink, and gossip a little in regard to the strange affair before they retired for the night.

The major shrewdly conjectured, that, having struck the camp at this particular time would prove to be a fortunate thing for him.

In the midst of bustle and excitement such men as he generally thrived.

The only thing was to manage to rub along until he got a chance to make a "stake."

This could be easily accomplished if Dutch Jake was not deaf to the voice of the charmer.

But the host manifested an intention of being obstinate when the veteran suggested that he would like to be accommodated with board and lodging for a week, "until his remittances arrived."

"Oh, yes!" Jake exclaimed with an incredulous air, "and vat 'bout der drinks? You vant me some of mine good whisky to find you too, all der vile, eh?"

"Oh, I don't mention such a small matter as that, you know," the major remarked, jovially. "I never suffer for the whisky while you stand behind the bar."

"Dot vash blayed out!" Jake replied, shutting one eye and winking mysteriously with the other. "Tominesch! I hafetumbled. You sniels der mice, aha?"

"A big rat, tail and all!"

And then the major braced himself to "brace" the Dutchman, and he succeeded too, for the strange sort of fear that Jake always possessed that the major could do his business much injury with his long tongue, if he was provoked, was still latent in his breast.

And at last Jake agreed to "hang up" the veteran for a week, but no longer.

"That's all right!" the major declared. "Inside of a week I'll find my man and then, Jake, bully boy, if you want a stake, just call on me!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEEKING A CLEW.

"COME to my house, Buckingham," the Mormon elder said to King Hiram as the two drew apart from the crowd, after the body was safely deposited in the empty shanty and the door securely fastened.

"I want to have a talk with you in private about this matter."

"There will be work to be done to-morrow, and we must arrange the plan of operations to-night."

"Yes, that is by far the best way, for no good results can be achieved by working blindly in the dark," King Hiram replied, in a strange, moody sort of way.

The ex-Danite was never noted for being particularly cheerful, and those who knew something of the past history of the man were wont to assert in their confidential moments that the memory of so many dark deeds weighted so heavily upon him that he and a light heart had long been strangers.

The men who dared to make such remarks were careful though to utter them so that they would not be likely to come to the ears of the dark-browed man whose heavy hand they had reason to dread.

The alcalde had secured the iron dagger with which the murder had been done, and also the strip of paper with the warning writing traced upon it apparently in characters of blood.

And after they had entered the Mormon elder's cabin, and the alcalde had taken pains to fasten the door securely, so that no one would be able to interrupt the conversation, he placed the articles upon the table, and then, from the drawer wherein he had placed it for safe-keeping, he took the first iron dagger which had drunk the life-blood of Yellow John, and laid it by the side of the other. Then, calling the attention of the ex-Danite to the weapons, he said:

"Do you see, the two are exactly alike?"

"Yes," responded King Hiram, taking up the weapons and examining them with a critical eye; "I should say that they were made by the same hand; there isn't the least bit of difference between them so far as I can see."

And while King Hiram had been looking at the iron daggers the Mormon elder carefully examined the strip of paper which had been wrapped around the handle of the weapon with which the murder of Old Solitary had been committed.

"I thought I might probably get a clew from the writing," he remarked; "but it is more like printing than writing, and the party who penned the sentence evidently did his best to conceal his hand."

"Of course; that was only natural under the circumstances," Buckingham observed. "The man who committed the murder did not intend to allow us to get a clew to his identity."

"Had we a specimen of his handwriting we might be able to hunt him down."

"Hiram, what does this mean, anyway?" asked the alcalde, abruptly, and then he read aloud the warning inscribed upon the paper.

"One by one are the guilty doomed to fall by the hand of the avenger—first the hirelings and then the masters."

"The meaning seems to be perfectly plain to me," King Hiram replied. "So plain that he who runs may read."

"The hirelings are—" and the elder hesitated.

"Yellow John, Old Solitary, and such fellows."

"And the masters?" and as he put the question the Mormon elder gave a nervous glance around as though he feared that the very walls had ears.

"You and I," responded the other, calmly. The alcalde started.

"Oh, come now, you are joking!"

"No, no, I never was more serious in all my life. Why did we leave Utah?"

"You know well enough," the Mormon elder replied, nervously.

"There were eleven of us who were forced to get out."

"Two leaders, you and myself, and nine men under our command."

"Of the nine only five came with us hyer. The other four scattered and went, no man knows where, and as they were reckless, blood-thirsty desperadoes, every one, it is more than probable that by this time the majority of them have cashed in their checks and are of no further account as far as this world is concerned."

"Five, I said, came with us to this camp—five entered this valley—where are they now?"

"Two are dead, Yellow John and Old Solitary, killed by this mysterious slayer, the third, Sailor Mike, was downed in the knife fight—"

"And the fourth is Sharp Bill."

"Yes."

"Then Sharp Bill, one other, and you and I, the leaders, are all that so far have escaped unharmed. I don't know as we ought to count Sailor Mike in for he did not suffer at the hands of this mysterious assassin—"

"Unless indeed the schoolmaster is the man as I suspected."

"I don't think you are correct about that," King Hiram replied.

"I'm afraid, elder, that you are letting your jealousy of the young man run away with your judgment."

"I knew that you hated the young fellow because he seems likely to prove a dangerous rival, and as long as he is around the town you will probably have considerable difficulty in getting the pretty English girl to consent to become your wife, but I didn't really believe that you thought he had anything to do with the murder of Yellow John."

"I did not at first," the alcalde explained. "Of course the accusation against him was a put-up job to get him out of the way, but after the knife fight—after I saw him disable Sailor Mike, without apparently half-trying, then the suspicion flashed upon me that he really was the man, for from the way in which he settled Mike, it is plain that, quiet and unpretending as he appears to be, yet in reality he is a fighter able to hold his own ag'in' any man in the town."

"Yes; the way he laid out Mike was a caution; it was as pretty a piece of work as I ever witnessed," King Hiram remarked, thoughtfully.

"I was not surprised that he got the best of Mike, for in some strange manner I had a presentiment he would prove the victor, but I did not expect to see a man like Sailor Mike disposed of with so little trouble; but for all that I think you are barking up the wrong tree when you take him to be the man who is using these iron daggers."

"But we are wandering from the track; we set out to get at the motive for these murders," the alcalde observed.

"To me the thing is plain enough, now that this scrawl has come to light," King Hiram replied, tapping the paper upon which was the blood-red writing.

"I can see the game plainly enough now. We eleven who fled from Utah on account of that deed of blood have been tracked and followed by an avenger."

"Yellow John and Old Solitary have already fallen, Sailor Mike and Sharp Bill will be the next to go, and then our turn will come."

The face of the Mormon elder became deadly pale, and his fat form fairly shivered with terror for a moment.

Then, with a great effort restraining his fear, he said:

"But, I say, Hiram, are we going to submit to this sort of thing? Are we going to quietly allow ourselves to be killed by this red-handed murderer without making any struggle for our lives?"

And the tremulous voice of the alcalde plainly showed how excited he had become over the matter.

"I, for one, intend to make a fight for my life!" the ex-Danite exclaimed, in his deep-toned, decided voice.

"But, alcalde—for there's no use of mincing the matter—we must understand right at the beginning that in this fight we have to encounter a foe who will certainly tax all our powers to their utmost."

"And the fellow is hyer, too, right in our camp, I've no doubt, right under our noses, laughing at the terror his bloody deeds have created."

"I don't think that thar's the least doubt about that."

"But who is it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, indeed, I cannot; but do you think you have spotted the man?"

And the Mormon elder leaned forward anxiously as he put the question.

"The road-agent, of course, is the man who has done the mischief."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

"And the description given of him by those who have encountered him state that he is a man of colossal height."

"Yes, yes."

Both had been placed in possession of the major's story.

"How does this big stranger—this Gideon Goldlace answer the description?"

The alcalde immediately saw there was foundation for the suspicion and expressed his wonder that the thought had not occurred to him before.

"Now then we must put our heads together, alcalde, and devise some scheme shrewd enough to entrap this avenger who dares to beard us right in our own camp."

Long and earnest was the debate, and it was not until after midnight had passed that the two contrived a trap which they fancied would be good to catch the High Horse of the Pacific.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BLACKSMITH'S INFORMATION.

THE call for the assemblage of the citizens had been carried far and wide, and as early as six in the morning the miners commenced to flock to the hotel, much to the delight of the Dutch host who perceived that there was good promise for a great day's business.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Major Bum when the Dutchman opened his heart enough to invite the veteran to partake of the invigorating and refreshing morning cocktail.

"Didn't I say that my coming would bring good luck to you?"

"I tell you what it is, I am big medicine for any bar-room. There's something about my rhiz that drives men to drink when they gaze upon it!"

And upon the strength of the Dutchman's admission that he believed there was some foundation for the idea, the major got a second cocktail, so that the first would not feel lonely in a strange place, as he explained.

Both the alcalde and King Hiram were up betimes and after the early breakfast they held a confab in the office of the Mormon elder in order to perfect their plans.

Hardly had the conference ended when the Englishman, Golightly, the blacksmith, made his appearance.

The Englishman was never noted for his good looks, but on this occasion his face wore a more sullen expression than usual.

"Hello, wot's the matter? you look as if something hadn't agreed with you," the alcalde remarked.

"It's that gal of mine," the Englishman grunted, as he helped himself to a seat.

"Well, wot of her?" exclaimed the alcalde, eagerly. Being infatuated by the pretty Susan, anything about her possessed a most decided interest for the Mormon elder.

"I came across her early this morning a-talking to that schoolmaster," the blacksmith complained.

"The deuce you did? Hang the fellow's impudence, say I!" Oakham cried.

"Ay, ay! that's what I say, 'ang the fellow's impudence!"

"I should have broken his head if I had been in your place," the alcalde remarked, betraying considerable warmth.

"I could have found it in my 'eart to 'ave done sum'mit of the sort, and I would 'ave done it, too, if I 'adn't 'appened to remember 'ow 'andy the chap was with his knife; and I tell you what it is, alcalde, I'm not anxious for to be ripped up, as Sailor Mike was 'other day."

"Oh! he wouldn't have dared!" the Mormon elder protested, with a fine show of indignation, although in his own mind, from what he had seen of the young man, he had formed the belief that the schoolmaster would not be apt to stand upon ceremony with anybody.

"Well, I don't know about that," the other rejoined.

"A chap that is able to 'andle a knife as well as the schoolmaster, is not apt to take much jaw from anybody."

"Oh! but he wouldn't have dared to injure you!" the alcalde exclaimed. "And if he did dare, I would have him swung up to the nearest tree so quickly that he would never have known what had hurt him until he felt the rope around his neck choking the life out of him."

It was a charming prospect for him to contemplate—the picture that low cunning of the alcalde had conjured up in his mind.

If the schoolmaster would only attack and kill the blacksmith, then he would be able to hang the young miner instant, and when the pretty

English girl was bereft of both lover and parent, what would prevent her from falling his prey?

The matter, however, did not appear to the blacksmith in as pleasant a light as to the crafty Mormon.

"Oh! I s'pose you would 'ang the chap, but that wouldn't do me any good, if he ripped me up with that beastly knife of his'n," the sturdy Englishman remarked, with a weighty shake of the head.

"That's sound sense, alcalde," King Hiram observed.

"If the schoolmaster cooked our friend's goose for him, hanging the culprit wouldn't bring back the life."

"No, no," assented the Englishman.

"Well, did you speak to the fellow?" the alcalde questioned.

"Oh, yes! I axed him plainly what he meant by coming after my darter."

"And what did he say?" asked the Mormon elder, eagerly, betraying by his anxiety how deeply interested he was in the matter.

"Oh! he was as blunt in his way as I was in mine. He told me to my teeth that he loved my gal and he wanted her for his wife."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed the Mormon elder, unable to restrain from revealing the rage which this intelligence had roused.

"Ay, ay, that is what he is, a scoundrel, and a bold one too, for when I replied that my gal was not for 'im, hand hif he didn't keep away 'e might get 'imself into trouble, 'e laughed hin my face."

"Oh, no," the impudent chap said, "a man don't get hinto trouble in this country because he takes a fancy to a pretty girl hand is not ashamed to own it."

"I love your darter, hand one of these days I want to marry 'er."

"Not with my consent!" I cried, "hif I know myself, hand I think I do."

"Then without your consent, for this his a free country, and we don't allow parents for to tyrannize over their children."

"Why, blarst my heyes!" says I, a-firing hup, and then I thought of that beastly knife, hand I checked myself, for my heyes 'appened to catch sight of it just then a-sticking in his belt, as murderous a-looking toad-sticker as I ever laid my two peepers on."

"Then my darter thought it was time to say something."

"She's a quiet piece, and one to look at 'er wouldn't think that butter would melt in her mouth, but she's like 'er mother, who 'ad a temper of 'er own, and when she set 'er foot down she was as stubborn as a donkey."

"She said: 'Father, don't be angry; Martin means to do what is right, I am sure.'"

"Martin eh?" and the Mormon elder fairly ground his teeth with rage.

"Yes, that is what she called him, as easy and as pert as you please."

"Oh, the scoundrel! I must get at him in some way!" the alcalde declared, getting fairly scarlet in the face with rage.

"Well, I said as 'ow I didn't want to 'ave nothing for to do with him, hand that I would be worry much obliged if 'e would go about 'is business and not trouble 'is head about my gal."

"And what did he say—the infamous rascal, what did he say?"

"Oh, 'e made me a bow, as perlite hand as cool as could be, and said:

"While I live I shall never cease to love your darter, hand hif you won't give 'er to me of your own free will, then I shall be hunder the disagreeable necessity of taking 'er without"—and that gal of mine stood by hand listened to this 'ere as quietly as though it was all law and Gospel."

"Undoubtedly it appeared so in her eyes," King Hiram remarked. "In all cases of this kind we make the mistake of looking at things from our own standpoint without taking into consideration the fact that if we were in another situation things might appear to be very different."

But the alcalde would not listen to this reasoning for an instant.

"It is perfectly disgraceful!" he declared. "The idea of inciting your daughter to bid open defiance to your commands!"

"Perhaps the fellow has got the conceit into his head that because he whipped Sailor Mike in the knife fight he can lord it over the town, but he can't as long as I reign hyer as alcalde, and I'll speedily made him comprehend that fact, too!"

All this was but mere brag and bluster, of course, for the Mormon elder was at his wits' end in the matter and could not for the life of him perceive any way by means of which he could get the best of the young miner.

King Hiram understood this well enough, but the Englishman didn't.

He believed the alcalde could easily live up to his boast, and withdrew feeling perfectly satisfied that the Mormon elder would find some way to curb the insolence, as he termed it, of the schoolmaster.

"Hiram, you must devise some way to get rid of this infernal schoolmaster!" the alcalde ex-

claimed abruptly, after the blacksmith had departed.

"It will be a difficult matter," the other observed, quietly.

"Difficult or not, it must be done!"

"Don't you think we had better get rid of the business in hand before we undertake anything new?"

"Oh, well, we'll settle that to-day."

"How sanguine you are all of a sudden," King Hiram observed. "Now I do not feel at all certain that we are going to pull through without any difficulty."

"This High Horse of the Pacific, as he calls himself, is no ordinary man, and though by springing the trap upon him that we have prepared we may succeed in catching him foul, yet there isn't any certainty about it."

"Oh, we'll succeed, sure; but come, it's time we were in the street."

The other assented to this, and the two departed.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TRAP.

WHEN the pair reached the street they found that about all the inhabitants of the town were assembled.

All the outlying districts tributary to the camp had sent in their people.

The story of the bold doings of the road-agent had spread far and wide, for in these thinly-settled districts such news seems borne on the wings of the wind, so quickly does it travel.

There wasn't the least doubt now in the minds of any of the miners that the mysterious road-agent was the murderous assassin—the hero of the iron daggers—and great was the wonder and comment that the thing excited.

But why the road-agent had seen fit to slay Yellow John and Old Solitary, and yet had spared the blacksmith, Golightly, and the Mormon, Soapy Sam, on Lone Mountain, when they were completely in his power, and had also disdained to harm Major Bum when he had encountered him on the edge of the town, was a mystery that the boldest guessers acknowledged they were unable to solve.

Some of the Gentiles suggested that Yellow John and Old Solitary had been killed because they deserved to die, it being well known that both had belonged to the bloody band known as the Destroying Angels, the terrible Mormon organization whose mission it was to give to the cold embraces of the grave all that were in any way obnoxious to the Mormon leaders.

But then it was more than suspected that Soapy Sam had also been one of the Danite band, and yet his life had been spared by the road-agent on Lone Mountain.

It was certainly a wonderful mystery and the more it was examined the darker and denser it seemed to grow.

Among the crowd stood Gideon Goldlace, the schoolmaster and Tom Breckenridge, busy in conversation.

"What do you reckon the alcalde is up to?" the old miner asked as the Mormon elder and King Hiram passed through the crowd on their way to the alcalde's office.

"Well, I don't exactly know," replied the schoolmaster, "but, I suppose, to learn what the people think about these mysterious deaths and this road-agent business, and, perhaps, to ask advice in regard to what ought to be done."

"From what I have seen of the alcalde I should not take him to be a man apt to take advice kindly from the people at large," the High Horse remarked, shrewdly.

"He's one of that kind of men who are troubled with the disease known as the big head, and the only cure for that is to cut the article off."

"The elder wouldn't be much good without his head," Long Tom remarked.

"He isn't much good with it," the schoolmaster observed, dryly.

By this time the alcalde and King Hiram had entered the alcalde's office, and the crowd in the street began to flock in after them.

"Say, come on, boys, or we won't stand any chance for a reserved seat at this hyer show, and mebbe it will be worth the seeing!" Goldlace exclaimed.

"That's so!" the old miner assented. "They are jest pouring into the shanty, and no mistake."

"Let us hurry up," the schoolmaster suggested.

The three started, but as they were on the outskirts of the crowd they found the building pretty well filled when they entered, at the tail end of the procession, as it were.

"Not much chance hyer fer reserved seats," Goldlace remarked to his pards, after they entered the building and discovered how great a crowd it contained.

Sharp Bill was standing by the door as the three came in, and overheard the remark.

"Thar's three or four seats right down thar on the front bench on the right-hand side," he said.

"I s'pose the alcalde has bin a-savin' of 'em fer somebody, but as thar don't seem fer to be anybody fer to take 'em, I s'pose you-'uns might as well have 'em as not."

"Yes, that will be a good idee, much obliged," said Long Tom Breckenridge, totally unsuspecting of danger.

But both of the others hesitated for a moment before they determined to accept the offer.

Though neither one held communication with the other the same thought was in both their minds.

These seats on the front bench had been reserved expressly for them and by the alcalde's order.

Now, what was his object in getting them so far to the front?

Did he desire their help—had he come to the conclusion that in this emergency their aid would be useful or was he up to some mischief?

Both thought that the latter surmise was far more probable than the first, but as neither one was a man capable of showing the white feather under ordinary circumstances, both being brave to rashness, after pausing for a moment they followed in the wake of the old miner, who was hastening down the apartment in order to get to the seats before any one else should occupy them.

As Sharp Bill had said, there was room for three or four on the front bench, and the three friends seated themselves there side by side.

Long Tom Breckenridge, never for an instant suspecting that there was any likelihood of there being anything wrong about the matter, gave all his attention to the alcalde and King Hiram who sat upon the little stage.

Everything there was just the same as it had always been with the exception that the elder's pulpit, which was a solid piece of furniture of home-made construction about four feet square, had been removed to one side of the stage, right in front of where the three pards sat.

The High Horse and the schoolmaster had glanced carelessly around them as they sat down.

They were curious to see if any armed Mormons were in their immediate vicinity.

They had expected to be surrounded by them, but in this they were disappointed, for nearly all the men nearest to them were Gentiles.

Both parties were clannish in their nature; the Mormons generally kept together, and the outsiders, as the saints called the unbelievers in their faith, followed their example.

And, as it happened, about all the Gentiles in the apartment were clustered in this particular part where the three late arrivals had found seats.

"Do you know," whispered the High Horse in the ear of the schoolmaster, "I was really afraid that thar was some durned trap 'bout this hyer thing, when that Mormon galoot told us 'bout the seats, 'cos 'tween you and me and the bed-post, I don't believe that these hyer Mormon ducks have any great love for a gen'leman 'bout my size, or for you either."

"I had a similar suspicion," the schoolmaster replied, speaking in the same cautious way, so that no one but the High Horse would be able to distinguish the words.

"I know that the alcalde fairly hates the sight of me, and would not hesitate to use almost any means to remove me from the town."

"Sart'in! I reckon that is as true as preaching," the High Horse replied.

"Long Tom hyer was a-telling me 'bout your little love scrape with the blacksmith's darter, and how this old fat cuss is anxious for to get her sealed to him, as they call it, his seventeenth wife, I s'pose."

"Sich ducks as he generally pick up a wife in every town they go into, and then when they travel around they kin always go to their own homes, and be independent of hotels; and, do you know, thar's a heap of sound sense in that idee, if these Mormon cusses did git it up."

"I don't see anything suspicious, though, do you?" asked the schoolmaster.

"No, no," Goldlace replied, slowly; "but somehow, I've kinder got an idee that if we stay hyer long enuff we may hear something drop. These Mormon galoots are p'isoned cusses, and they generally do their level best when it comes to tricks and traps."

"That is their game allers—they never make a good squar' fight, you know, but allers calculate to wade in with the advantage on their side."

"And that is why they are sech pesky mean wretches to deal with. I would jest as lief travel with a lot of snakes as to herd in with these yere reptiles."

"Most all sorts of snakes are kind o' honest birds, and they generally give you fair warning when their voice is for war, but with these Mormon beasts—the fighting ones, I mean; I don't count the common crowd, 'cos they're poor, misguided critters, who are trying for to make a living as well as they know how—they'll take you by the fist with one hand, tell you how glad they are to see you, and then jab a knife into you with the other while they are speaking."

"I've been thar, and I know them like a book."

"If the world at large knew half of the deeds of blood that kin be traced to the hands of the Destroying Angels, as the Danites were called in the Mormon lingo, it would stand aghast with horror."

"I believe you," the schoolmaster replied.

Then at this point the conversation was inter-

rupted by the alcalde getting upon his feet and waving his hand to command silence.

All sound of conversation immediately ceased and the hall became as still as death.

"Citizens of Babylon Bar! We have met hyer to-day to consider some mighty important business," the alcalde began.

"Of course, I s'pose you all have an idee why you have been convened hyer."

"A red-handed murderer has been stalking up and down in our quiet camp, and his bloody knife has already stolen away the lives of two of our best men."

"Now, fellow-citizens, kin we allow this here thing to go on?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A SURPRISE.

"No, no, no!" came in chorus from the mouths of the listeners, the Gentiles taking the lead in the replying, for the Mormons were a dull, stolid set, who, like mere machines, seemed to move only at the will of their master.

"You are right, fellow-citizens; we cannot allow these crimes to be committed with impunity in our midst," the alcalde continued.

"There must be a stop put to them, or else we might as well abandon the camp."

"If this hyer road-agent is going to collect toll of every man who comes into camp or who goes out of it, how long do you s'pose we can stand it?"

A deep growl ascended from the throats of the audience, which was as much as to say that they did not believe the camp could stand it very long, and they did not feel any disposition to try the experiment, anyway.

"No, fellow-citizens, this road-agent business must be stopped, and as for this bloody murderer, with his iron daggers, he must be hanged to the nearest tree."

"Yes, yes," yelled the audience, vociferously, "hang him, hang him!"

"Isn't thar an old cooking recipe which says something 'bout 'first catch your hare?' whispered Goldlace in the ear of the schoolmaster.

"Oh, yes, but these fools apparently think that it can be done by shouting," the young miner replied.

"It's easy enough to say hang him, fellow-citizens," observed the Mormon elder, "but we must first catch the fellow, then hanging will follow as a matter of course."

"Yes, yes," again shouted the audience.

"The Mormon cuss has got more sense than I gave him credit for," the High Horse whispered to the young miner. "I really thought he calculated to hang the fellow afore he caught him."

"No, he's not quite such a fool as that—not quite such a fool as he looks," the schoolmaster replied.

"Not such a fool as he looks," the High Horse observed. "No, I should hope not."

"If he was, saltpeter wouldn't save him."

"Of course as alcalde of the town it is my business to hunt down all such scoundrels, and I assure you, fellow-citizens, in this case I have not let the grass grow under my feet, but ever since the murder of Yellow John my agents have been hard at work, and at last I have secured a clew to the assassin."

The excitement among the audience was now at fever heat, and about half the people in the place rose to their feet and craned their necks toward the stage, as though they expected to see the mysterious road-agent jump up from some corner of the stage like a jack-in-a-box.

"Say, w'ot do you think of this hyer?" the High Horse asked, still speaking cautiously, so that the words reached the ears of the schoolmaster alone.

"He's playing some bluff game, I reckon. I don't believe he's got any clew at all, and as for the agents of whom he speaks the only agents he has are the bull-headed Mormon desperadoes, and I reckon such galoots would make fine fools of themselves if they undertook any detective business," the young miner answered contemptuously.

"I reckon you're right; he's playing a big game of brag and that is all there is to it," the High Horse remarked.

"And now, fellow-citizens, I reckon I'm going to astonish you," the alcalde exclaimed.

"Of course I don't s'pose you will hardly be able to believe it, when I tell you that the road-agent—the secret assassin—this man with the iron daggers, is right hyer in this very room, now!"

The excitement created by this announcement was intense, and every man in the audience glanced inquiringly and with suspicion at his neighbor as much as to ask: "Are you the man?"

"Would you believe it?" asked Long Tom Breckenridge, intensely excited, of Goldlace.

"No, and what is more I don't," the High Horse answered, dryly.

"I laid a trap for him, fellow-citizens, and he had no better sense than to walk right into it," the Mormon elder continued. "And now I have got him exactly where I want him."

The High Horse and the schoolmaster looked at each other.

There was a suspicion in the minds of both of

the men that the alcalde was referring to one of them.

"Look out for your man, boys!"

And at the word from the alcalde, Soapy Sam and another Mormon desperado popped up from behind the pulpit with cocked repeating-rifles in their hands which they leveled full at the breast of Gideon Goldlace.

They were within ten feet of him and had the High Horse so completely at their mercy that escape was impossible.

Before he could have drawn a weapon he would have been riddled by the rifle-balls.

All the bystanders immediately shrunk away from the side of the threatened man with the exception of Long Tom Breckenridge and the schoolmaster.

They had become the stranger's pards since he had arrived in the camp, and in the true-hearted Western style they scorned to desert him now that danger threatened.

"Hol' on!" Goldlace exclaimed. "W'ot in thunder and lightning do you mean by p'inting your pop-guns at me?"

"Play light on those triggers, boys, those blame thing are apt to go off mighty sudden sometimes, and as far as I know I ain't got any particular call to be h'isted into the other world jist now."

"Do you surrender?" demanded the alcalde, sternly.

"Surrender?" and from the peculiar intonation, one would have been apt to believe that the High Horse did not know the meaning of the word.

"Yes, surrender! I spoke plain enough, I hope!" the Mormon elder cried, tartly.

"But I don't understand what on airth you air gitting arter," Goldlace protested.

"You will find out in ample time, but answer my question, or I'll have you shot where you stand."

"Do you want to murder me?" demanded the High Horse, indignantly.

"If that is your little game just drive on your mule-cart, for I reckon I kin die now jest as well as at any other time, but keep your eyes peeled for a bloody reckoning arterwards, that's all."

"Do you surrender?"

"Seeing as how you hain't left me no choice in the matter, I s'pose I do."

"King Hiram, disarm him."

Buckingham hastened to comply with the alcalde's command, and now the schoolmaster and Long Tom Breckenridge thought it was about time for them to interfere.

"Hold on, alcalde, ain't you rushing matters a leetle too fast?" the young miner asked.

"Yes, 'pears to me you're moving along in this hyer business at reg'lar railroad speed," Long Tom Breckenridge added.

"Be satisfied I know what I am about," rejoined the Mormon elder, scowling at the interruption.

"Well, you may, but I'll be hanged if I believe anybody else does," retorted the young miner, boldly.

"You're the alcalde of the town, I know, but that don't make you a king with absolute power of life and death in your hands."

"What charge do you make against my pard hyer?"

"Suppose I don't choose to explain?" demanded the alcalde, haughtily.

"Then, though we Gentiles are not so powerful in numbers as you Mormons, yet we'll give you a little fight, just for greens!"

And before any one in the room suspected that the schoolmaster meant to follow words with deeds his revolvers were out and ready cocked for action.

To his intense surprise and disgust the Mormon elder found himself "covered" by one of the weapons.

Above all things else in this life Jonathan Oakham prized his precious person, and when he found himself so unexpectedly in danger his coward soul took fright.

"Be careful what you do, young man!" he cried, attempting after his usual fashion to cover up his fear by bluff and brag.

"Be careful how you provoke a contest that can only end in the death of yourself and all your friends."

"We'll have plenty of company on the dark road, alcalde, and you will be one of the first to start," the schoolmaster replied, with grim emphasis.

The display that the schoolmaster had but recently given of his prowess had a tendency to make his words respected, and there was not a listener in the room from the Mormon elder downward who did not believe the young miner would be as good as his word.

"What is it you want?" the elder demanded, perceiving that he would be obliged, under the circumstances, to pay some attention to the schoolmaster.

"I want to know why you have arrested my pard?"

"Because he is the murderer of Yellow John and Old Solitary, the man who has used the iron daggers, and who, as the disguised road-agent, has announced his intention of making things lively around the camp."

All within the room almost held their breath

as they listened to the accusation, and great was their surprise when the High Horse burst out into a vociferous laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he cried. "Well now, you kin take my boots if this hyer ain't about the best joke of the season. If I'm the man with the iron daggers, I'd like to know where I picked the tools up."

"And I'm the road-agent, too! Oh, hyer's richness for you! Why, this is the most ridiculous thing I ever got into!"

"But I surrender, gentlemen; don't you fear 'bout that; and you're welcome to my weepens."

CHAPTER XXII.

SAILOR MIKE'S VISITOR.

AND now, that all the particulars relating to our tale may be narrated in their natural sequence, we must retrace our steps and describe a strange incident which occurred on the very night that Old Solitary fell by the hand of the mysterious unknown whose bloody work had struck such terror to the very heart of the mining-camp.

Sailor Mike had been taken to Doc Provo's cabin so that he might have all possible attention, and for a while the medical man, inspired by the fact that the Mormon elder had promised to reward him liberally if he succeeded in curing the wounded man, paid the patient all possible attention.

The blood of the sufferer being in a bad state, owing to his life of dissipation, it seemed at first as if he would not recover from the effects of the terrible wound which he had received, and the doctor had grave doubts about the case, but, thanks to the naturally strong constitution of the man, after a time he recovered. So, when Provo perceived he was likely to get well, he relaxed his attention and began to pay his usual visits to the hotel, and in order to make up for his enforced abstinence, he drank twice as heavily as usual, rarely ever returning to his cabin before midnight, and then generally in such a state of intoxication that he had all he could do to make his way into the shanty and tumble into his bunk just as he was.

Sailor Mike did not relish being left alone in this way, and complained loudly.

There was medicine to be taken every two hours, and then the time hung heavily on the hands of the wounded ruffian when he was left to his own devices, particularly at night.

About all he could do was to call up memories of bygone days, and there were many of these recollections that were particularly disagreeable, as the images of the past came trooping through his brain as he lay upon the rude bunk and watched the flickering of the candle burning upon the table.

He had remonstrated with Doc Provo, but that worthy had bluntly told him that if he didn't like it he could lump it.

He was not going to stay there and keep a sick man company when the whisky-bottle was circulating right merrily at the Saints' Rest.

So the wounded ruffian, being unable to help himself, was forced to be content.

On the night that was to witness the tragic death of Old Solitary, Doc Provo, after supper was ended, took his departure as usual.

The doctor kept bachelor's hall after the minor fashion and cooked for both himself and the wounded man.

Sailor Mike growled his objections and said:

"Why in thunder can't you stay home and not go to that gin-mill and git so full of bad whisky? You'll break your neck one of these nights, as sure as shooting!"

"I reckon you'd be mighty glad to go along if you could," the doctor retorted.

"Mebbe I would; but if you were in my fix, and I was in your place, darn me if I wouldn't stay at home once in a while."

"Sailor, you want decidedly too much pork for your shilling!" Provo declared.

"What you think you would do if you were all right, and what you would do if you were, are two entirely different things, I'm thinking."

"Ta, ta, I'll bring you all the news that's stirring when I come back."

"You'll be so drunk that you will have all you kin do to roll in and roll into your bunk!" the wounded man declared, angrily, as the doctor with a sarcastic smile vanished through the door.

It was as Mike had anticipated; the doctor did not get in until after midnight, and then he was so under the influence of the whisky he had imbibed that he could hardly walk or talk, but the murder of Old Solitary had made such an impression upon him that he managed, despite his drunken state, to make the wounded man acquainted with what had taken place, but the effort required so much exertion that he keeled over on his bunk immediately afterward and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

"Ay, ay; now he's done for until morning," Sailor Mike grumbled.

He was anxious to converse with the doctor in regard to the murder, for the bare statement of the fact, which was about all the doctor succeeded in making, had but whetted the appetite of the listener for further particulars.

"He's the biggest old soaker that I ever run foul of!" he continued, in disgust.

"And when he tumbles into that bunk of his'n in this 'ere condition, I reckon that a cannon fired off alongside of his head wouldn't disturb him much."

Mike was aware of the fact from experience, for on the previous evening, wanting the aid of the doctor, he had tried to awaken him by shouting at the top of his lungs, but all to no avail.

"So, Old Solitary is dead," the wounded ruffian muttered. "Killed, too, right in the street by this iron-dagger feller."

"Durn me! if it ain't the queerest kind of a rifle. I can't make no head or tail out of it, no-how."

"First, the cuss sticks his iron dagger into Yellow John and uses him up for good and all, and Yellow John was a man big enuff and good enuff to have fought old Satan himself, too."

"And then he tackles Solitary, and Old Solitary was no slouch when it came to a fight, but this critter didn't seem to have the least bit of difficulty in laying him out."

"What does it mean, anyway?"

And as Sailor Mike put the question he looked around him suspiciously at the bare walls of the cabin as though he expected thereon to find written an answer to his question.

"We were all pards, the three on us—thar were ten in the beginning—ten as good men as ever traveled together, and then came that durned bloody business at Mount Carmel on the Virgin river."

"I've been in a good many scrapes in my life, the thoughts of which ain't pleasant to me now when I look back at 'em, but that Mount Carmel business is the worst of the lot, and now it really seems as if some of us gang w'ot did the job are going to git our pay for it, and in a way that we would despise if we had any say-so 'bout it."

"Yellow John is wiped out and now Old Solitary has cashed in his checks, and it was all on account of that bloody bit of business, too, that he became Old Solitary."

"Why, he was a-telling on me only last week that he had got so now that he couldn't go to sleep without dreaming of the hull thing over again, and he said that if the thing didn't quit haunting him he reckoned he would go clean crazy."

"Death stepped in though and settled the account."

"Thar ain't many of the gang left now, anyway, and if this iron-dagger chap has set out for to clean us all out—and it really looks like it—it won't take him long."

Then the ruffian was silent for a few moments, his memory busy with the distasteful recollections of the past, and then he broke out again, and this time his accents were fierce.

"It's all the fault of that durned old galoot of an alcalde!" he cried.

"Curse him! why hasn't he been made for to step up to the captain's office and settle?"

"He was at the bottom of the hull affair; thar wouldn't have been any trouble but for him."

"He stood in the background and pushed the rest of us on; we did the work for his profit, but mighty small luck did he have in the hull thing, anyhow."

"The more I think about it, the more it seems to me as if thar was a curse on the hull business."

"We all had to git out and come down hyer to this yere corner of the earth, but it really looks as if an avenger was onto our track."

"I've heered them Gospel sharps say that blood will have blood, and mebbe it is so, but old Oakham is the man what ought for to suffer."

"He was the galoot what planned the job, and by rights he ought to have been salivated at the first lick."

"Mebbe this reckoning of mine is all nonsense though, and thar ain't no such thing."

The wounded ruffian closed his eyes wearily.

By this time the hands on the little clock ticking on the wall pointed to one, and no sound but the ticking of the time-piece and the heavy breathing of the drunken doctor could be heard.

For four or five minutes the eyes of the wounded man remained closed.

He began to believe he was going to drop off to sleep, "a consummation devoutly to be wished," for sleep that "knits up the raveled sleeve of care" banishes the ugly remembrances of the past.

But a slight noise, that seemed to arise within the room, made Sailor Mike open his eyes with a start.

His ears had not deceived him—the noise was real, not the product of a feverish brain—the fantasy of a heated imagination.

While the wounded man's eyes had been closed a visitor had entered the room and taken a seat by the table within arm's length of the bunk whereon Sailor Mike lay.

It was the mysterious road-agent, all robed in white, and in his hand he brandished one of the strange iron daggers that the camp of Babylon Bar had already learned to know so well.

Sailor Mike gave a gasp of surprise.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STORY OF THE MASSACRE.

"SAILOR MIKE, are you prepared to die?" asked the unexpected visitor, in a hollow voice, and he brandished the iron dagger so near to the wounded man that the point was within an inch of his throat.

"Help!" cried Sailor Mike, half choking in his terror.

The point of the dagger grazed his throat.

"Another cry of alarm, and it will be your last!" cried the road-agent, sternly.

"What do you want? Are you going to kill me?" the ruffian asked, terror-stricken at the danger which seemed to threaten him so nearly.

"Well, that depends upon circumstances," the disguised man answered.

"If you attempt to give the alarm, I shall most certainly slay you without mercy."

"Spare me, and I swear to you that I will be as quiet as a dead man—I'm pretty near dead anyway, as you can see with half an eye," the fellow added, glancing down ruefully at his wounded arm.

"Oh, that's only a scratch, you'll get over it in time; you're worth half a dozen dead men yet."

"I wish I was able to think so."

Sailor Mike had been greatly discouraged by his wound, the most severe by far that he had ever received in all his wild and desperate career, and he was greatly afraid he would never be a well man again.

His wound had greatly pulled him down, and half the savageness of his nature seemed to have departed.

"Oh, yes, you'll pull through—that is, if you have a fair chance—if I let you," the road-agent remarked, and there was such a decided menace perceptible in his tones that Sailor Mike felt decidedly uneasy.

"What have you got ag'in' me—who are you, anyway, and what harm did I ever do to you?"

"Oh! you fairly rain questions!" exclaimed the intruder, with a low and malicious laugh.

"But to take them up in the regular order, let me say that I have got a great deal against you, and as for my name you can call me Mister Nobody, that's a good name, and I'll answer to it as well as any other, although by this time this hyer camp has bestowed a title on me that will be likely to stick as long as I do business in this region, and that is The Man with the Iron Daggers."

"Yes, yes, I heered of your bloody work to-night," the wounded man murmured.

"Oh, you have," the road-agent remarked, with apparent surprise.

"News travels apace, eh, in this hyer camp?" And then he turned his gaze upon the sleeping doctor.

"Did this fellow have sense enough to tell you what happened to-night?"

Sailor Mike nodded.

"I thought he was too drunk to be able to talk."

"Well, he didn't make much of a fist at it, but I managed to make out what he was driving at."

"You know then that Old Solitary is dead?"

"Yes."

"Slain by me, right in the open street, with an iron dagger, and the blow came as swift and as irresistible as the vengeance of fate itself."

Despite his efforts to appear calm Sailor Mike could not prevent a slight shiver from passing over his form.

"Old Solitary was an old-time pard of yours?"

"He was."

"And Yellow John, who also fell by my hand, he was your pard too?"

"Yes."

"Don't you feel a little nervous when you reflect that two of your old pards have been struck down—their thread of life so untimely cut in twain that there was no time for either prayer or repentance?"

"What has their fate to do with me?" asked the ruffian, sullenly.

"They were your pards?"

"Yes, they used to be, but I haven't had much to do with them lately."

"Five years ago though all of you used to hang out 'round Mount Carmel on the Virgin river in southwestern Utah."

The wounded man trembled and his face showed evident signs of strong emotion.

"Well, why don't you answer?" demanded the intruder, finding that the other hesitated.

"It's true, isn't it? All of you used to make Mount Carmel, on the Rio Virgin, your stamping-ground about five years ago?"

"There was ten in the gang, all told, and the leader of the outfit was this dark-browed Mormon devil, King Hiram Buckingham."

"Yes, I believe so."

"And this scoundrel of an alcalde was thar too, this smooth-tongued villain, Jonathan Oakham?"

"Yes, he was."

"And how was it that you all fled from that region—what caused the gang of nine, King Hiram and the Mormon elder to flee as though Satan and all his imps were in chase?"

"I don't keer to bother myself with thinking

"bout them times, seeing as how they are all past and gone," the other replied, nervously.

"Possibly you don't remember," remarked the outlaw, with a perceptible sneer.

"Men like yourself, leading a busy life, full of bustle and adventure, cannot be expected to remember every little circumstance that occurs in their passage through the world.

"Methinks though, I once heard a story of a tragedy that happened some five years ago by the banks of the Virgin river, near Mount Carmel.

"Are you familiar with the details?"

"I—I—I don't know," responded the wounded man, with quivering lips.

"I will rehearse the story to you; possibly it may refresh your memory.

"Five years ago a little family who had experienced hard luck in Nevada followed the course of the Virgin river up its valley into Utah and settled near Mount Carmel.

"There was a man and wife and three beautiful children, all of them of tender years.

"The name of the family was Maxwell if I remember rightly—it was Maxwell, wasn't it?"

"I—I believe so," and as the wounded ruffian made the reply, his swarthy face seemed to be growing white with terror.

"Yes, Maxwell was the name. Tom Maxwell was the husband, a royal good fellow, who never had an enemy in the world until he settled in that den of serpents who had their lair by the Virgin river.

"The wife was called Edith.

"They got a little ranch and set out to make a living for themselves and their little ones with a right good will.

"Jonathan Oakham was the presiding elder of the district, and from the first his ruffian fancy was taken by the fair face of the young wife, who was an extremely beautiful woman.

"He professed to be the friend of the young couple, and did all in his power to aid them, and they were duly grateful, although they did not like his unceasing solicitations to them to join the Mormon faith.

"He coveted the wife, and so he essayed to win the husband from her.

"He pictured to the young man how greatly he would thrive if he would only turn Mormon, introduced him to some Mormon women whom he represented were greatly in love with him and dying to become his wives.

"But the husband was not to be tempted, and the scheme failed.

"At last the eyes of the young couple were opened; they beheld the Mormon elder in his true colors, and in scorn and contempt they drove him from their doors.

"The rôle of the fox being no longer good for a disguise Oakham tried to play the lion. He summoned his Danite band, and in the dead of night the ruffians attacked the humble cabin of the settlers.

"It was the elder's intention to slay the husband and abduct the wife.

"The scheme failed, for the young husband made a gallant fight for his life even when confronted with such overwhelming odds, and in the struggle not only was the husband killed but the wife also and the three beautiful babes.

"All perished that bore the Maxwell name and dwelt in that fatal house.

"Then, in order to conceal their crime, the Destroying Angels set fire to the house, expecting that the flames would remove all evidence of the bloody deed.

"But Heaven had destined that the massacre should come to light, and the fire only destroyed a part of the house.

"In the morning the news of the murder was blazed far and wide. The elder and his bloody-handed gang were suspected, and although he had friends and influence he did not dare to stay and face an investigation, but all of the eleven concerned in the crime fled like murderers in the night.

"The elder Hiram and five of the band came to this place, the other four thought they would be safe from all earthly vengeance in upper Utah.

"Do you know what they are now?"

"I do not."

"Dead, every man! hunted down and slain with an iron dagger—an iron dagger made like the rude weapon which was found imbedded in the heart of the young husband after the tragedy.

"Five came here, two have been slain; that leaves three. I know two of them, yourself and Bill Sharply. I do not count King Hiram; but the third, who is he?"

"Will you spare me if I tell you?" pleaded the ruffian, terror-stricken.

"I will until you have fully recovered from your wound. Then, if you are within my reach, beware!" replied the avenger, sternly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BARGAIN.

"As Heaven is my judge, I took no actual part in the thing," Sailor Mike exclaimed, evidently in mortal terror.

"No, of course not," the disguised road-agent rejoined, in a sneering tone. "You were prob-

ably a thousand miles away at the time it occurred."

"Oh, no, I was on the ground, I own up to that; but I didn't take any hand in the matter, and I tried to persuade the elder that it would be better for him not to have any bloodshed."

"Certainly, and I do not doubt that every other man in the gang would swear to the same thing," responded the other, in a manner which plainly showed he did not believe the assurance of the wounded desperado.

"Well, it's the truth," protested Sailor Mike. "You needn't believe me if you don't want to, but I was afraid that that would be trouble and I didn't want to get mixed up with it; but the elder is a bull-headed son of a gun and he won't listen to no sense, n' how."

"It is only natural for a man, when he is brought to an account, to try and evade the responsibility," the road-agent remarked; "and though I do not believe a word of your yarn, yet I don't think any the worse of you for trying to get out of it."

"But what I want of you is the name of this third man, who has been so careful to keep in the background."

Sailor Mike began to feel sulky.

"I don't know why I should betray my pal," he muttered.

"You don't know why?"

"No, I don't!"

"I can give you a good and sufficient reason."

"You kin?" and the ruffian looked doubtful.

"Yes, for if you do not speak, your life will come to a speedy end."

And with the words the road-agent put the point of the iron dagger to the throat of the wounded man.

"You wouldn't kill me, helpless as I am?" the desperado protested.

"Yes, I would, and with as little mercy as though you were only a mad-dog," and from the tone in which the avenger spoke Sailor Mike felt convinced he meant every word he uttered.

"Come, which is it to be?" the disguised man asked, continuing his speech.

"Will you speak, or shall I make an end of you now and hyer?"

And the road-agent advanced the dagger so near to the throat of the wounded man that the point of the weapon pierced the skin.

The desperado fairly shivered with terror, for he fully realized that he was in the power of an unscrupulous foe who would not hesitate to execute his threat if provoked by resistance.

"Don't murder me and I'll tell you the name," he gasped.

"That's right—that's sensible," the outlaw commented.

"What is your pard to you, or you to him? If he was in your fix, do you believe that he wouldn't give you away in a moment if he thought he could make anything by so doing?"

"Oh, I s'pose he'd go back on me quick enuff," Sailor Mike admitted.

"You can bet your bottom dollar he would, and you would be a fool to try to screen him at your own expense."

"Yes, I s'pose so; but I was allers too square for the rest of the gang."

"The name?" demanded the road-agent, impatiently.

"Soapy Sam."

"Oho, 'tis as I thought; I had a suspicion he was the man I wanted, but how was it that he managed to keep in the background so well?"

"He joined the gang on the very night that the fight took place and then next day got scared on account of it and bolted."

"He denies that he is the man and when he first came hyer and I recognized him, he stuck out that I was mistaken and said he was never down in the Virgin river country and that he had never seen me before."

"I spoke to the alcalde 'bout it 'cos I reckoned the elder would know him, but he pretended he didn't remember anything 'bout the boss, and told me I had better let bygones be bygones, and that was all the satisfaction I got."

"But I say, can't you let up on a feller?" the ruffian pleaded, plaintively.

"Jest look how I'm fixed! I'm crippled for life, so the doctor says. My arm will never be worth much to me again."

"As Heaven is my judge, I will turn over a new leaf—I'll lead a squar' life, I wish I may die if I don't."

"Since I've ben a-laying hyer on my back I've been doing a heap of thinking and I've come to the conclusion that this hyer crooked business don't pay, so I'm going to travel on the straight trail."

"That's an old song that says:

"When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be;

When the devil got well, the devil a monk was he."

Responded the road-agent.

"Well, I s'pose that's so, sure enuff," the wounded desperado replied, with a shake of the head.

"But I tell you, stranger, I'm squar' as a die in w'ot I say."

"If I kin only have a new deal, I'll play a different kind of game."

"In course I s'pose you'll think that I am only

chinning, but it's honest truth I am a-telling you now."

"Mike, it is ag'in' my principles to strike a man when he's down, and that is the reason why I spare you now," the road-agent remarked with the air of a judge.

"But I have sworn to hunt down and slay without mercy all the men who were concerned in the massacre on the Virgin river."

"You were one of the men and I don't see how I can let you off, but I'll tell you what it is, Mike, since you swear that you are going to try and do the squar' thing I feel inclined to give you a chance for your life."

"So help me Heaven! I'll live on the squar' hyerafter," the wounded desperado protested.

"As I said, I hate to strike a man when he's incapable of resisting, and your wound, of course, takes you out of the ranks of fighting men."

"You are safe from my vengeance until you are fairly on your legs again and then look out for me for I'll be onter you like an avalanche."

"Before your wound heals, clear out from this hyer region."

"Put miles and miles of sea and land between you and this wild Western country. Don't stay on this continent if you want to live, and I s'pose life has some sweetness in it for you."

"You bet," responded Sailor Mike, emphatically.

"It's a bargain, boss, I'll clear out jest as soon as I am able to travel."

"I'll make my way to the nearest seaport and git a ship. I ain't forgot my old tricks and I can make a living on the blue water as well as I ever could."

"I'm from across the sea anyway, and I'll go back thar again, but I say, boss, one thing stumps me; what on earth have you got to do with this matter anyhow?"

"Don't you know who I am?"

"No, I don't, although it seems to me as if I've seen you somewhar, but 't's pretty hard telling, on account of your being all muffled up in that air way."

"I'm the spirit of the murdered man come back to haunt the earth until the foul murder is avenged," the road-agent replied.

Sailor Mike shook his head.

Like all his class he was deeply superstitious but this visitor was decidedly too mortal in his ways to be mistaken for an inhabitant of another world.

"I can't go the spook business," he remarked, "and I reckon you ain't the man himself for I know he received wounds enuff to kill him if he had a dozen lives, and as I saw him stone dead arter the fight was over I know that you can't be him."

"If I were the dead man come to life the murderous band that did the deed would not have more cause to be alarmed," and the tone in which the avenger spoke plainly showed how determined he was in this resolution.

"One by one I will strike them, first the common murderer who committed the crime, bought by the gold of this villainous Mormon elder, and then this old-time Danite leader, King Buckingham, and lastly the alcalde himself."

"I reserve him for the last, for I wish him to die a thousand deaths in anticipation."

"He'll be mighty apt to cut and run when he finds that thar's somebody arter him," the other observed.

"The elder is a big feller to blow, but he ain't got any more heart than a rabbit."

"I'll hunt him to the very end of the world!" the road-agent declared, fiercely.

"He cannot escape my vengeance no matter whar he may 'hide nor how carefully he endeavors to guard himself against it. If he were to surround himself with an army I would find means to strike him."

"And now the time has come for him to understand that the avenger is on his track."

"In the morning I want you to send a message that you want to see him, and when he comes reveal to him the particulars of this interview."

"You can suppress what parts you like, you know, but let him understand the main facts."

"All right, I'll do it, and you kin jest bet all the rocks you kin scare up that it will come pretty near to making the old cuss crazy."

"That is what I want. I would have him so afraid of death as to tremble even at his own shadow, and as the blows of the secret avenger fall upon the guilty heads of his gang he will understand that the hour of retribution draweth nigh."

"And you, Sailor Mike, do not forget that your life hangs upon a thread until you cross the seas!"

And then the mysterious man departed as suddenly as he had appeared.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ALCALDE LEARNS THE TRUTH.

"Oh, yes, I surrender, sure enuff," the High Horse repeated. "I'm jest the kind of a critter to knock under when I find that the odds are dead ag'in' me; but as to being the galoot with the iron dagger—the idee is too ridiculous for

anything, and I reckon, alcalde, that you must be clean off your nut when you go for to make sich a charge as that!"

Nearly every one in the audience drew a long breath when the stranger announced that he was willing to surrender, for there were few of the lookers-on who did not anticipate a fight when the alcalde denounced Goldlace.

At a signal from the Mormon elder Sharp Bill advanced, and the High Horse delivered his weapons.

"Take good keer of those tools," Goldlace continued, "cos they ain't used to rough handling, and they're like me, pesky delicate."

"You'll be a durned sight more delicate when we git yer big carcass a-dangling at the end of a rope," Sharp Bill observed, insolently.

And then he was unwise enough to turn his back, and the High Horse, with a tremendous kick, sent the Mormon bravo spinning across the platform howling with pain.

The Mormons grasped their weapons, but the High Horse laughed in their faces and calmed them with a gentle wave of his massive hand.

"It's all right, boys, no need to grab yer popguns!" he remarked.

"I only gave this smart galoot a gentle love-pat so as to teach him not to be so free with his tongue hyerarter."

"I'm a gentleman, I am, and I mean to be treated as sich."

The lookers-on did not really understand why Sharp Bill should make such a row over a simple kick, for Goldlace had administered it so deftly that not a soul in the apartment had any idea of the tremendous force with which the heavy boot of Goldlace had landed on the body of the Mormon.

As soon as the excitement caused by this little episode had died away the alcalde spoke.

"Search him!" he commanded.

"Search me!" Goldlace exclaimed, and he drew his tall form up in such a way that the action made every Mormon in the room grasp his weapon the tighter.

"Yes, that is what I said," the alcalde replied, in an explanatory sort of way. "I am obliged to have you searched, you know."

"No, I don't know anything 'bout it," Goldlace retorted, a little gruffly, for he was not pleased with this part of the programme.

"That is all according to law, you know, and, of course, as alcalde of the camp I must proceed in reg'lar order."

"Wa-al, wa-al, I s'pose it's all right, seeing as how you say so, and I reckon as you are chief cook and bottle-washer of these hyer diggings, you are a-giving it to me straight, but I tell you, alcalde, it goes ag'in' my grain mighty hard for to have any man s'arch me jest as if I was a blamed poor shote of a hoss-thief," the High Horse remarked, and there was a look on his face as he spoke that made the Mormon sharps keep a wary eye on him.

It really looked as if, single-handed, he had half a mind to fight the crowd, weaponless as he was.

"Upon my word, sir, I assure you it is what ought to be done under the circumstances," replied the alcalde, who was awed by the resolute demeanor of the stranger.

"Durn me if I kin git it through my ha'r at all!" the Californian asserted.

"W'ot do you s'pose you're going to make by s'arching me?"

"I expect to find some of the iron daggers concealed in your clothes, or some such proof that you are the man who has been committing these terrible crimes."

The High Horse laughed outright.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed, "wa-al, alcalde, if you ain't barking up the wrong tree then I don't want a cent; but if that air is the leetle game, I am willing to chip in and take a hand."

"And, I say, if you kin skeer up any iron daggers on me, durned if I won't be willing to eat 'em, ho, ho, ho!"

"Then you will permit yourself to be searched?" the Mormon elder asked.

"Right you air! sail in your elephants!"

"Buckingham, go through him," the elder commanded.

The old-time Danite leader made a careful examination, but, as the High Horse predicted, the search came to naught.

"Didn't I tell you so?" the Californian exclaimed. "And what in thunder put the idee into your head that I had anything to do with this hyer iron dagger business?"

"You have been accused of being the disguised marauder, and then you answer the description which all who have encountered the man give of him," Oakham answered.

"Durn me if I kin see how you kin make that out!" the Californian exclaimed.

"The road-agent is described as being tall—over six feet high—"

"Sakes alive! I ain't the only long-legged chap in this deestrick, am I?"

"No, but you are the tallest man in the camp, and then you are a stranger in this section."

"Wa-al, w'ot of it? I won't be when you folks git acquainted with me," replied the High Horse, shrewdly.

"Of course when a man is accused I am

obliged to listen to the charge," the alcalde explained.

"Sart'in, that is all right—thar ain't ary discount on that, and I was accused, was I?"

"You were?"

"Wa-al, whar's the man? Let him step out and face me; that's all I want." And the High Horse looked around him in a way which, in the opinion of the audience, boded no good to the man who had been bold enough to charge him with being the mysterious assassin who had used the iron dagger in such a terrible way.

The alcalde hesitated and glanced at King Hiram as though he desired counsel.

"Come, trot him out—let him come forward, brace up and have some style about him!" the Californian continued.

Then a sudden idea appeared to come to the alcalde, and he looked around the apartment in an inquiring manner.

"Will the citizen who charged this stranger with being the road-agent have the kindness to step forward?" he said.

Not a man stirred, but each one looked at his neighbor inquiringly, as much as to ask:

"Are you the party?"

The High Horse glanced around him with an air of astonishment.

"Do you mean to say, alcalde, that you don't know who the critter was?" he demanded.

"You are correct; I do not know."

"Wa-al, if this don't beat all creation!" Goldlace exclaimed, in disgust.

"If you don't know the galoot, how in thunder did you come to listen to the critter? And you, as the alcalde, too, ought to know everybody in the town."

"Oh, I didn't see the man," the Mormon elder explained, endeavoring to appear as innocent as possible under the circumstances.

"You didn't see him?"

"No, I received a letter stating that you were the road-agent and advising me to arrest you as soon as possible."

"And w'ot was the signature?"

"I—I—don't remember—in fact, I don't really think there was any signature to the thing."

"You've got it now, I s'pose?"

"Certainly, in my pocket."

But after searching for it in vain the alcalde announced that it had evidently been lost or mislaid.

"And that is all the proof thar is ag'in' me?" demanded the Californian, evidently in a passion.

"Yes, that is all."

"Say, give me back my we'pons, you fellers!" Goldlace exclaimed, indignantly.

"And I tell you w'ot it is," he continued, after the weapons were returned to him, "the next time you want to work a rifle of this kind don't try it on a man 'bout my size or thar'll be a heap of trouble."

"I ain't the kind of man to set myself up ag'in' the law, but when it comes to any fool-work of this kind, it ain't safe for any one to monkey round me no more than if I was a first-class saw-hill in running order."

"I ain't going to make ary trouble 'bout this thing this time, but on the next rifle look out for an earthquake."

The Californian withdrew, followed by his friends; the crowd came after, leaving the alcalde and King Hiram alone in the apartment.

"The trick was a total failure," the Mormon elder observed, in disgust. "I made up my mind that he was the man for sure and was certain we would find some evidence upon his person to confirm our suspicions."

"It was an unlucky move, and I should have advised you against it if you had confided in me," King Hiram remarked.

"This man will prove to be dangerous if we rouse him to action."

"I was eager to do something—eager to learn the meaning of these strange murders, for they shake my very soul with fear," Oakham answered.

But the Mormon elder was destined to shake still more with dread before that day ended.

Right after the meeting he received a message from Sailor Mike, and going with the ex-Danite he listened to the strange tale that the wounded desperado had to tell.

"It is as I feared," the alcalde murmured, with white lips, when the story was ended.

"The avenger is on our track and we are all doomed men if we do not succeed in discovering and killing the bloodhound."

"Easier said than done, alcalde," suggested the grim ex-Danite chief.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE HILLS.

It was the day after the one on which occurred the strange events described in our last chapter.

The Englishman, Golightly, although dull and phlegmatic by nature, had been so greatly excited by the startling happenings in which he had chanced to play a part that he had found it an absolute impossibility to settle down to his work.

So he loitered around the hotel all the forenoon, gossiping with other idlers as indolent as

himself, and for a wonder the blacksmith indulged pretty freely at the bar.

Golightly was naturally of a stingy disposition and was seldom known to invite the "boys" to come up and take something at his expense, and so, as a rule, he fought shy of the hotel, and then, too, he was not over and above fond of liquor.

But on this occasion he drank half a dozen times, and when he went home to dinner he was more "exhilarated" than he had ever been before since his arrival in the mining-camp.

His daughter, the fair English girl, noticed that he acted strangely, but as she had never seen him under the influence of liquor before she had no suspicion of the truth.

And now that his senses were whirling under the influence of the potent juices of King Barleycorn, he yielded to a delusion that even in his sober moments had considerable weight with him, and that was that he was an expert "prospector."

A prospector in the mining-region is a man who makes a business of locating mining properties.

With his hammer and a small pick the prospector invades the wilderness and goes searching among the rocks for the "sign" which reveals to him that the precious metal which mankind covets so eagerly lies hidden in the earth below.

And so expert do some of these veteran prospectors become that it really seems as if they smelt out the hiding-places of the treasures, just as a dog by the scent steals upon his feathered or four-footed prey.

Now the idea was perfectly ridiculous that the dull-witted Englishman, who was not fitted either by education or instinct for such delicate work, could succeed, right in the neighborhood of the mining-camp, in making any important discoveries.

Every foot of the ground for miles around had been carefully worked over by at least twenty veteran prospectors, and every "lead" worth anything had been staked out by these hardy pioneers.

Golightly, being of a reserved disposition, never revealed to any of the townsmen why it was that he indulged in his long walks up in the foothills, and if by chance he happened to encounter any one he always hid his tools beneath the rough coat which he wore on these occasions for this particular purpose, and pretended that he was merely taking a stroll for the purpose of admiring the scenery.

Of course the majority of the miners didn't take any stock in the yarn, for, as one of them observed to a crowd one night at the Saints' Rest when the subject came up:

"The idea of that darned Johnny Bull a-keering for real native-born American scenery is all in my eye!"

The blacksmith was a typical Englishman in one respect.

He was always telling how much better things were "at home, you know," and this sort of talk did not please the native-born element, who were disposed when such remarks were made to put the pertinent question:

"Why didn't you stay at home then, if everything was so much better and you was a-gitting along so well?"

But to this searching inquiry no satisfactory answer was ever given.

In the Englishman's opinion, the finding of a rich lead was all a piece of pure luck; there wasn't any science or skill required, and he believed he stood as good a chance to discover a valuable mine as the most experienced prospectors who ever tapped hammer to rock or put a pick in virgin soil that ne'er before had felt the tread of white man's foot.

So, after his frugal noon repast was over, instead of going to work, or lying down and indulging in a nap, as he ought to have done, he hid his tools under his coat, announced to his daughter that he was going for a walk, and set out.

He struck off to the northeast, intending to explore a wild and desolate region lying well up in the foothills of the Mogollon mountain range.

He had never attempted to visit this region before, for Golightly was not a particularly brave man, and he had a wholesome horror of the Indian warriors who once in a while made themselves unpleasantly conspicuous in the neighborhood of the camp.

He did not intend to give any of the red braves a chance to lift his topknot, for although like all the rest of the inhabitants of the district he went armed to the teeth, yet he did not have sufficient confidence in his own prowess to believe he could successfully "stand off" a half a dozen or more of dusky warriors bent upon mischief.

But on this occasion the potent fire-water which he had imbibed gave him a false courage, and he determined to brave the dangers of the wild and desolate region which he had often longed to explore, yet had been restrained by

Another thing, too, tended to make him feel inclined to risk the venture.

No red-skins had been seen in the neighbor-

hood of the camp for over a month, and the wise men of the town, men learned in Indian matters, had predicted that there wasn't any probability of the savages "putting in an appearance" until the approach of winter, as they were now busy securing game in the wild regions far to the westward.

Golightly soon left the town behind, taking the trail leading up the river, which had been worn by the feet of hunters mainly and travelers bound for the Zuni agency, but these were few and far between.

But when he came to the point where the path bent around to the westward so as to circle around the side of Lone Mountain, through which defile it penetrated the Mogollon mountain range, the blacksmith struck off to the right and plunged into the broken country, which was a perfect wilderness of rocks, amid which was a scanty growth of scrub oaks and stunted pines, with here and there an open grassy valley, all of small size, however.

Golightly struggled on, making but slow progress, owing to the nature of the ground, for a good half an hour, until he came to where the mountain chain began.

The rocks were too vast to climb, and he wandered along the base, seeking a passage, for he could see that if he overcame this obstacle there was considerable country to be explored before the actual mountain peaks, rising in their mighty grandeur, placed a barrier in the way of human curiosity.

The Englishman had been active with his hammer ever since he quitted the trail, and though he found traces of mineral in plenty, yet it was neither gold nor silver.

It was iron, and in a remarkably pure state, too.

"By jingo!" the blacksmith exclaimed, after he had come across about a dozen iron "leads," "when this country becomes settled iron men will make a big thing out of this 'ere."

Then to his mind came thoughts of the mysterious assassin who had slain his victims with an iron dagger.

"'Ere's material enough for to make a blooming 'cap of such weapons," he muttered, "but it ain't in the right shape for to be worked now, so it's as plain as the nose on a man's face that the murderer didn't get 'is daggers out of this 'ere metal."

Along the rocky wall he wandered until he came to an opening in the range.

It was a narrow defile, and as the rocks towered above it on both sides, running up to the height of fifty feet or more, it was decidedly dark and gloomy.

Golightly hesitated to enter it for a moment, for as it was a winding passage, he could not see whither it led.

"In just such canyons as this, though, they make big strikes sometimes," he muttered.

Then plucking up courage he entered the gloomy defile, examining the rocks carefully as he went along, trusting to discover some signs of the precious metals for which he panted.

If he had been an experienced miner he would have known at a glance that there wasn't the least chance of finding either gold or silver in such a formation.

It took the blacksmith some twenty minutes to pass through the defile, and then he emerged into a wild and picturesque valley, thickly dotted with clumps of large bushes and small trees.

By this time Golightly began to feel the effects of his long tramp.

Sitting down upon the soft sward in the shelter of one of the tree clumps he concluded to rest awhile, and found the place so comfortable that he stretched himself out at full length the better to enjoy it, and, as a natural consequence, inside of five minutes he was fast asleep.

The tramp had consumed considerable time, and it was about five o'clock when the tired man laid himself down, and so long did he sleep, thanks to the liquor he had consumed and the tiresome walk he had taken, that the night had come with the moon high in the heavens before he again opened his eyes.

Then, starting up to a sitting posture, he looked upon a sight which fairly made his blood run chilly with horror.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE TASK.

TWENTY feet from the spot where the blacksmith sat, so much astonished that he could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes, was the strangely-disguised road-agent.

He was dressed exactly the same as when he had appeared on the side of Lone Mountain, and with his flowing white robe he presented a ghostly sight.

"Hello, old man, are you through snoozing?" the road-agent inquired, in a very matter-of-fact way, as the Englishman rubbed his eyes and stared, as astonished a man as ever stood in shoe-leather.

Then in a trice the masked marauder whipped out a revolver, cocked it with great show and leveled it full at Golightly's breast.

"Come now, which is it to be?" he asked—"peace or war?"

"Oh, peace by all means!" stammered the

blacksmith, who had not the least thought of attempting to resist.

"Spoken like a sensible man," quoth the marauder, "and I don't mind letting you know that it is by far the best course, for if you should attempt to show fight I should be under the disagreeable necessity of plugging you for keeps, and no mistake!"

"Don't trouble yourself!" Golightly made haste to exclaim. "I know too much for to ever think of disputing with a chap of your kidney."

"Your head is screwed on right," remarked the other, approvingly.

"And now, Golightly, my noble Briton, have the kindness to shuck yourself of your weapons, and be quick about it, too, unless you want to stay hyer all night, for I've considerable work for you to do."

"Work for me to do?" exclaimed the blacksmith, in astonishment.

"Yes, and it is a lucky thing for me that you happened to stray up in this region or else I should have had to do it myself, and I tell you, Golightly, work is a thing I despise, and then, too, you kin do it ever so much better than I can, for you're a professional while I am only an amateur."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Of course not—how should you, unless you are good at guessing conundrums."

"I never guessed one in my life," responded the Englishman, solemnly.

"I don't doubt it in the least; such things are not in your line; but come, put your weapons on the ground and then go over and take a seat by that woodpile yonder," and the road-agent pointed to where some dry sticks were heaped together some thirty feet to the right.

Golightly looked at the woodpile in wonder. He felt sure that it had not been there when he sat down to rest, for it could not possibly have escaped his notice, as he had taken particular care to examine all the surroundings.

Evidently the stranger had gathered the wood while he slept.

Obedient to the road-agent's command the blacksmith drew his weapons from his belt and deposited them upon the sward; then he marched over and took a seat upon a rock which jutted out of the earth in close proximity to the woodpile, and as he sat down he noticed that his hammer was by the side of the rock, and by the hammer lay a small punch with a sharp point, such as is used for making holes in iron working, and a foot or two off was a small heap of scrap iron, such as had evidently come from the wreck of some wagon.

The blacksmith now began to have an idea of the nature of the work required at his hands by the road-agent.

That worthy carefully placed a huge flat stone over the weapons that Golightly had yielded, evidently so that the blacksmith should not get a chance to take him by surprise, and then he came over to where Golightly sat.

"Got a match about your clothes?" he asked.

Golightly being an inveterate smoker was provided with matches and produced them.

"Now, old man, if you'll have the kindness to start the fire I shall be obliged."

Of course a request couched in such courtly terms could not fail to insure instant obedience.

The blacksmith went to work immediately, and within five minutes had a roaring little fire.

And by its light he saw that in addition to his hammer and the iron punch a pair of tongs kept the scrap heap company.

Then from behind a rock, where he had it concealed, the road-agent produced an old pail two-thirds filled with water.

"Thar, now, I reckon we are all fixed for business," the disguised marauder remarked, with an approving glance around.

"I s'pose you want some iron work done?" Golightly observed.

"You've hit the bull's-eye plum center furst time," the road-agent replied. "I reckon I've provided all the tools right up to the handle."

"There isn't any anvil," the blacksmith said, after a glance around to assure himself that that necessary tool was not lurking in the shadow of some rock.

"An anvil was too durned heavy for me to tote away up hyer, and then, too, I reckon you've got the only one that there is in these diggings, and as I didn't want to steal that, to say nothing of lugging it away up hyer, I thought we could make shift to do without it."

"That stone that you are sitting on is a flint rock of the hardest kind, and it's jest about the right bight, too."

"Jest see it's as squar', and as solid and as smooth as though it had been dressed right out of a big block."

"What do you want better than that?"

"Oh, it will do very well," Golightly admitted. "Now, what do you want me to make?" he asked in a professional sort of way as he took up a piece of iron from the heap—a bit of wagon-tire about two feet long.

"I want a few more iron daggers," responded the road-agent, in the most matter-of-fact way.

The blacksmith dropped the piece of iron as though it had suddenly become red-hot in his hands.

"Some iron daggers!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, you know the pattern of the kind I use, I reckon," and then the road-agent chuckled as though he thought he had given utterance to a very good joke.

"They are jest as simple as simple kin be: jest a leetle piece of round iron, 'bout as big round as a lead pencil, and 'bout eight inches long; you jest bring one end to a p'int so I will be able to jab it into a feller without too much trouble, and for a handle you jest twist a three-inch piece round t'other one, 'bout three inches from the end."

"This hyer is a kind of work that I ain't anxious to do," the blacksmith remarked, slowly, for it went sorely against his inclination to have anything to do with these murderous iron daggers.

"Nobody said you was anxious for the job," the outlaw replied, speaking in the most indifferent manner possible.

"I ain't asking you whether you are hanker-ing arter the job or not."

"In this hyer business it is my say-so, and I reckon you don't hold any cards in your hand to entitle you to say a word 'bout the game."

"All thar is to the matter is right hyer: you've got to make the iron daggers or else thar'll be one blacksmith less in New Mexico afore the moon goes down to-night."

The Englishman shivered; he felt that he was helpless in the power of the marauder, and that the other was making no empty boast when he asserted that Golightly's life was at his mercy.

"But I hate to make the tools of death," he muttered.

"What nonsense! You've made many a good, big knife in your time, I reckon."

"Sart'in."

"How could you tell when you made the knife that it would not be used to shorten the earthly career of some galoot?"

"I couldn't tell anything about it, of course," the Englishman admitted.

"Well, you can't tell 'bout these iron daggers. Because I have used a few sich weapons to stick into men who were better out of the world than in it, it doesn't follow that I shall keep on in that lead."

"No, I s'pose not."

"But it's no business of yours, anyway. You are to make the daggers, and arter I git them I reckon I am free to use them jest as I see fit."

"That's my platform, and I mean to stick to it."

"There's no cold chisel," remarked the blacksmith, trying to find some excuse to get out of the disagreeable job.

"Yes, thar is, down in the shadow of the rock thar, jest beyond the tongs."

This was the truth; the cold chisel was lying quite near to the rock in the shadow, and so had escaped Golightly's vision.

"I see it now."

"Pick yer tools up then and go to work, and the quicker you get at it the better, that is, if you are anxious to git home, for nary foot out of this hyer valley do you stir until the tools are made."

Golightly could not perceive that there was any avenue of escape open, and so he concluded to do the work with as good a grace as possible, for he had a wholesome fear of the road-agent and would not have willingly offended him.

Selecting some pieces of iron from the heap Golightly thrust them into the fire and then placed the tools upon the rock ready for use.

"I reckon I want 'bout four daggers," the disguised man answered.

"Four daggers?"

"Yes, four will 'bout fill the bill. Thar's four more men in the camp of Babylon Bar that I owe a visit to, and I'm a man who always pays his debts."

Golightly shuddered; he guessed a fearful meaning to the words.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STAMPING THE TOOLS.

AND now that the Englishman had got fairly to work he hurried the job forward as rapidly as possible.

The more quickly the work was accomplished the sooner he would be able to escape from his uncomfortable position.

This was the way the blacksmith reasoned, and so he did his level best on the daggers.

It did not take him long to complete the task, and soon four iron daggers of the same rude pattern that the mysterious murders had rendered familiar to the people of Babylon Bar lay upon the anvil stone.

The Englishman was a good workman, and despite the disadvantages under which he labored in the execution of this job, the daggers were as much alike as two peas.

"Good! you know how to do your work!" the road-agent announced in approval, when the blacksmith laid the last dagger upon the stone and said he was through.

"When I want another job in your line I shall know where to come."

"For 'eaven's sake don't ever pick me hout ag'in for any such work as this 'ere!" the Englishman exclaimed.

"Hold on a moment, you are not through yet," the marauder observed. "I forgot to tell you that I want some sign put upon these tools so I will be able to know which is which."

"That's four men, and to each man a dagger, and so that thar sha'n't be any mistake I'll have each man's initials put on the tool destined for him, and then when you get back to the town you kin have the pleasure of telling these sharps what kind of a surprise party I've got in store for them."

"All right, but I would a 'eap sight rather you'd send the message by somebody else," Golightly remarked.

"Oh, no, you're my mutton this time, my bully blacksmith, and you must do exactly as I say or else there will be blood on the face of the moon."

"Oh, I ain't a-going to quarrel with you," the blacksmith replied, humbly.

"So long as you don't stick one of these nasty little tools into me—and I don't see why you should, 'cos I never 'armed you in hany way—I don't s'pose I ought to bother my 'ead 'bout it if you kill 'alf the town."

"Spoken like a sensible man!" the road-agent declared.

"As I remarked a while ago, your head is screwed on rightly and no mistake."

"Now then to work!"

"Flatten the heads of the daggers until they are about as big as quarters and then with this punch put in the letters as I give them to you."

The blacksmith complied, and when the first dagger was ready to be marked, he nodded to the marauder.

"Prick in the letter S with the punch."

"I can't make a very good job of it," the blacksmith remarked.

"It will answer so long as the letter can be distinguished."

"There'll be no trouble about that."

And when the rude design was finished, the Englishman held it up for the inspection of the other.

"Furst-rate, that will do bully; anybody can see with half an eye that it's meant for an S, and you'll be able to identify it, anyway."

"That is destined to rid the earth of that loud-mouthed Mormon braggart, Sharp Bill."

Golightly stared.

"You don't mean it?" he cried.

"Yes, I do, every word of it. He will be the next man in the camp of Babylon Bar to fall by the thrust of the iron dagger."

Again a shiver shook the frame of the Englishman as he listened to the cold-blooded declaration.

"But drive on your mule team—git on with the work. I don't want to stay hyer all night, even if you ain't in a hurry."

"But I am; I want to get home as soon as possible," the blacksmith asserted.

"I've been away ever since dinner, and my daughter won't know what 'as become of me."

"Go ahead then!"

When the dagger was prepared for the punch the road-agent said:

"Slap a B onto that one."

Golightly complied and then glanced inquiringly at the mysterious man as he laid the tool to one side; he was wondering for whom this instrument was intended, and was running over in his mind the names of all the men in the camp that commenced with the letter B.

"That's for Sam Barrington, Soapy Sam. I'm going to give him a chance to see if his wheedling ways will have any influence with his majesty of the hoofs, horns and tail who rules in the realms of fire."

Golightly shuddered as he placed the second dagger by the side of the first. This strange man seemed to be something more than a mere mortal.

It really appeared to the rather dull mind of the blacksmith that he was an agent of fate itself.

When the third dagger was ready for the stamp the road-agent spoke again.

"Put a K on that for the especial benefit of King Hiram Buckingham, the man who deserved to die years ago, for his soul is red with crime, and the bloody deeds of the Destroying Angels, the terrible band of which he was a prominent member, cry aloud to Heaven for justice."

The Englishman shook his head; he did not feel so sure in his mind that the avenger could succeed in giving to death the stout-limbed, lion-hearted ex-Danite.

He was a different sort of man from the other two, and he ventured to remark:

"I'm thinking that King Hiram will be apt to give you a tough fight, for he's a man that no three or five men in the camp are anxious to have trouble with."

"Buckingham is a good man," the outlaw admitted, "but his crimes are so great that when the avenger comes, the thoughts of the bloody deeds of the past will weaken his arm and render him as powerless as a child."

The third dagger being done, the fourth was prepared.

"Mark an A on that for this wretch of a Mormon elder, Jonathan Oakham, the alcalde of the camp!"

The blacksmith was so much astonished by this disclosure that he could not refrain from giving utterance to an exclamation of surprise.

"You don't mean to say that you're going to strike at the alcalde?" he asked.

"Ay; the last, but not the least of the criminals who have been tried and condemned to death."

"In reality, he is more guilty than all the rest combined, for he was the master, while the others were but the tools whom he employed to do his bidding, and that is why he is reserved for the last."

"I wish to torture him—I wish him to understand that the avenger is on his track and that, as the servants are stricken down, the messenger of death is gradually coming closer and closer to him."

"The terror that this will inspire in his breast will make him feel an agony equal to a thousand deaths."

"He will be like a man engulfed in a raging flood and being rapidly swept to a precipice over which to plunge is certain death."

"Sure destruction is before him—a lingering death full of agony—he knows that each minute of escaping time is bringing him nearer and nearer to the end, and yet he is powerless to avert the dreadful doom."

"All he can do is to pray for a speedy end to his torments that his agony may be shortened."

The blacksmith listened with wondering ears. Surely never since the world began was there a more implacable foe.

The last dagger was stamped and placed by the side of the other.

"Now, you are free to depart," the road-agent said, "but as you are a stranger in these parts the chances are a hundred to one that you will not be able to find your way to the village until morning without a guide, so I will conduct you until the lights of the camp are in sight, then you will be able to find your way."

"Your we'pons I will have sent back to you to-morrow."

"And now when you reach Babylon Bar I want you to go straight to the alcalde and tell him of all that has occurred this night."

"Let him understand that the avenger is on the track of both him and his murdering band, and then he will be able to understand who deals the blows when they begin to fall."

Golightly promised to fulfill the instructions to the letter, and then the outlaw conducted him through the wilderness.

The road-agent seemed to know every foot of the way, and traversed the distance in half the time that it had taken Golightly to cover it.

"Remember! go straight to the alcalde and tell him from me that the avenger is so hot upon his track—so fierce in his desire for vengeance, that if he were to hide himself a thousand feet deep in the earth's center the iron dagger would search him out and deal to him the death that he deserves!"

"Go on!"

Golightly obeyed the command, and after he had got a hundred yards away he threw a cautious glance over his shoulder.

But the strangely-disguised road-agent had disappeared.

The blacksmith halted and rubbed his eyes for a moment as though he wished to assure himself that he was awake, then he resumed his journey toward the camp.

"Never did I ever 'ear tell of such a thing as this 'ere!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FIRST DAGGER.

It was nearly midnight when the blacksmith reached the town, but as he knew that the alcalde rarely went to bed until after twelve he went straight to his cabin.

As he had anticipated the Mormon elder had not retired, but sat at a table with King Hiram indulging in a little game of poker.

Great was the amazement with which the alcalde listened to the strange recital, and his unbelief was so strong that he asked the Englishman if he was sure that he hadn't fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing.

"I fell asleep fast enough," Golightly admitted. "But I was as wide awake as I am this minute when the thing happened."

"If you don't believe me I think I can find the place to-morrow, and I will take you there and you can see with your own eyes that what I tell you about the fire and the anvil stone is true as gospel."

"It would not be a bad idea to get a gang together and search this ground of which Golightly speaks in the most thorough manner," King Hiram suggested. "I shouldn't be surprised if our friend hyer has happened to stumble right on the hiding-place of the scoundrel, and if we take a gang big enough and go for him in the right way, perhaps we may be able to smoke the fellow out of his hole."

The alcalde thought the idea an excellent one, and said as much.

The blacksmith was doubtful; he had a great idea of the road-agent's smartness, and did not believe he would be easily taken in a trap.

But when he expressed this opinion neither of the others agreed with him.

"These smart fellows all make a mistake sometimes," the alcalde remarked, shrewdly, "and I can't see any reason why this chap should be any exception to the rule."

"He was a fool to brag about the game he was going to play," King Hiram observed. "A wise man doesn't show his hand unless it is so strong that thar can't be any question about his winning, and I don't think the fellow has it quite so sure as that."

"He may be able to nail his men with his daggers, and then again he may not."

"Forewarned is forearmed, and as far as I am concerned I'll take precious good care he don't take me by surprise."

"Nor me either," responded the Mormon elder, stoutly; but it was plainly to be seen that he did not take the matter as coolly as he tried to make out.

"I'll get my men together the first thing in the morning and we'll get off early," King Hiram remarked.

"We ought to be on the road by six at the latest."

The alcalde assented to this, and then Golightly took his departure, promising to be on hand in good time in the morning.

But on his way home an idea occurred to the worthy blacksmith which troubled him greatly.

"How will the road-agent take this thing?" he murmured to himself as he made his way to his home.

The blacksmith's cabin being situated on the outskirts of the camp was some distance from the alcalde's shanty.

"He told me to be sure and tell the alcalde all that happened, but when it comes to leading a gang right into his territory won't that make trouble?"

"Ang me if I want to get 'im arter me."

And by the time he reached his cabin he had become pretty well muddled up, and really did not know whether to go or not.

His daughter was sitting up waiting his return, and very much worried at his prolonged absence.

When he made known to her who it was she removed the bar that fastened the door on the inside and admitted him.

But when Golightly attempted to close the door he discovered that there was some obstacle in the way, and when he tried to open the door for the purpose of ascertaining what was the matter he found he could not make it budge.

Then spoke a voice, harsh, hoarse and discordant, but which the blacksmith recognized on the instant.

"Hold on—go slow; I want to speak a word to you."

It was the voice of the mysterious road-agent.

"All right," Golightly responded, releasing his hold on the door.

"You'll find your we'pons in the shed under a board, and in regard to this little picnic to-morrow, go ahead!"

"I'll be on hand to receive the gang with all the honors, and the iron dagger, number one, will have a chance to get in its work before the day is over. Ta, ta!"

Then the door shut suddenly.

When Golightly recovered from the stupor caused by this mysterious communication sufficiently to open the door and look cautiously out into the moonlight night, there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Do you see him, father?" asked the girl, amazed at the mysterious affair.

"No, but mebbe he's dodged around the corner of the house."

The girl's curiosity was excited, and she eagerly plied her father with numerous questions, but he did not think it wise to confide the particulars of the strange adventure which had befallen him to her, and accounted for his long absence by saying he had been detained on business.

It was some time before slumber visited the eyes of the old blacksmith that night.

It was plain that the road-agent must have played the spy outside the alcalde's cabin, and so had been able to learn of the proposed expedition, and though Golightly did not take much stock in any supernatural business, yet he could not help muttering to himself that this affair was really so marvelous in all its details that it seemed as if there was something more than human agency at the bottom of it.

The blacksmith was up betimes in the morning, and at six o'clock promptly he was at the alcalde's cabin.

King Hiram had not allowed the grass to grow under his feet, and the expedition was all ready to start.

There were ten men in the party besides the alcalde and Buckingham.

Ten of the best men in the town, as far as the Mormons were concerned, all armed to the teeth, just as if they were going on the war-trail against the red-skins.

In the party were the two men who had been marked for slaughter by the outlaw avenger, Sharp Bill and Soapy Sam.

Golightly felt his very flesh creep as he looked upon the Mormon braggart, boasting as usual of his prowess.

If the road-agent kept his word, Sharp Bill would never return alive to the camp, and so, acting on a sudden impulse, the blacksmith took the Mormon desperado aside and told him that he had a warning that if he, Bill, did not remain at home, something fatal might befall him.

At this the desperado laughed outright; the idea seemed to him to be perfectly absurd, and he said as much.

Golightly gave up the attempt.

"A willful man will 'ave 'is hown way," he muttered.

"I 'ave warned him, and now his danger comes 'is blood will be upon his own head."

The expedition started, the blacksmith in the advance as guide.

All went well until the broken country was reached, and then Golightly's memory failed him and a couple of hours were wasted before the defile leading into the valley was discovered.

It was new ground to all of the party, and they went forward very cautiously.

In such a broken, rugged country, a single man, well armed and intrenched behind the rocks, could hold twenty-five or thirty at bay.

The rock which had served for the anvil, the little heap of scrap iron and ashes of the fire were all discovered, and the Mormon leaders began to believe that the Englishman's story was correct, notwithstanding its strangeness.

"We must scatter, boys, and hunt over every foot of this valley," King Hiram said.

"I reckon we are on the right scent this time and no mistake."

"Keep a bright lookout, men, though, for this fellow is poison on the fight."

The band separated and each man set out on his own hook with the exception of the alcalde, King Hiram and the blacksmith, who kept together.

"This is a sort of a cove region," Buckingham remarked, "and I shouldn't be surprised if our game has a hole somewhere in these rocks, but if we once get on his track we will smoke him out fast enough."

At the end of an hour the men began to straggle in to the meeting-point selected by King Hiram.

All brought the same report: there wasn't the slightest trace that a human foot had ever stepped within the valley, with the exception of the spot where Golightly had worked.

One by one the men came up until there was but a solitary member of the party missing.

Sharp Bill was absent.

The faces of the alcalde and King Hiram grew dark and the blacksmith shook his head solemnly.

Search was instantly made.

In a retired part of the valley the missing man was found, flat on his back and stone dead, although the body was yet warm.

He had evidently been seized by the throat, thrown on his back, and then the deadly iron dagger had stolen his life away.

There was the instrument, buried in his breast, and Golightly plucking it out showed that on the hilt it bore a rudely-made S. The first dagger had done its work.

CHAPTER XXX.

COMING TO A DECISION.

THE depression produced by this mysterious death was great.

The men of the expedition looked at each other with anxious eyes, and on each troubled face was the question:

"Whose turn will come next?"

King Hiram was the first to recover from the consternation caused by this unwelcome discovery.

"Poor Bill was taken by surprise and downed before he knew he was in danger," the old Danite chieftain observed.

"We made a mistake, boys, in separating; we ought to have gone in couples, for it's evident that this scoundrel is no slouch, and is more than a match for an ordinary man."

"He must be lurking somewhere in the neighborhood now," the Mormon elder remarked, with a frightened glance around, as though he feared to see the face of the demoniac assassin peering at him from some crevice in the rocks, or glaring through the green needles of the pines.

"Yes, we must be up and doing, for he has not had time to escape, as the body is not yet cold."

Then dividing the force into little squads of two and three men, the Mormons set themselves earnestly to work to track the assassin.

King Hiram was no mean trailer, and there were a couple of men in the party who were old Indian-fighters, and the knowledge they had picked up stood them in good stead now.

It did not take these veteran plainsmen long to "lift" the trail, but the ground over which it ran was so rough and stony that it was impossible for them to follow it closely.

As near as they could make out the murderer

was a man who wore Indian moccasins and possessed small feet.

"I can understand the moccasin business easily enough," King Hiram remarked.

"It is to enable him to steal noiselessly upon his victims, and so take them by surprise, and it is plain, too, that we were barking up the wrong tree when we accused this big stranger of being the man with the iron daggers. He couldn't put his hoofs in any such moccasins as made these prints."

"Yes, yes, that is true enough," the Mormon elder asserted, looking pale and anxious.

After much examination the trackers ran the trail up among the rocks, and there, despite their skill, they were obliged to own up beat.

It was impossible for anything but a beast, who could follow the track by the scent, to track the fugitive over the hard flint rocks, upon whose unyielding surface the soft moccasins did not leave the slightest impression.

The avenger had struck his blow and then made his escape, leaving no more trace behind him after he had gained the rocks than if he had, bird-like, flown through the air.

Three good hours the trackers spent in the search, and then, reluctantly, King Hiram decided to give it up.

"We are but wasting time," he said, his face darker and more sullen than ever.

"The fellow has managed to elude us, but, maybe, the time will come when he will not be able to play the trick so successfully as on the present occasion."

"Now that we are on our guard we may be able to trap him."

Despite these encouraging words there was a dense gloom upon the party all the way back to the town.

The mysterious and deadly blows of this secret slayer inspired far more terror than would have been inspired by the attacks of an open foe.

As King Hiram grimly observed to the alcalde when he called his attention to the gloom which had fallen upon the spirits of the party:

"It is the unknown danger that chills the heart."

"Some of these men are as brave as bulldogs and would fight an ordinary foe to the death without a whimper, but this fellow, striking these terrible blows in the dark, scares them, for his strokes seem to fall with as little warning as the thunderbolt out of a clear sky."

The camp was on tip-toes with curiosity when the expedition was seen, in the distance, and great was the wonder with which the miners listened to the strange tale that the members of the expedition told.

They had constructed a litter of pine boughs and brought the body of the slain man along with them.

The Mormon elder and King Hiram repaired to the alcalde's office, leaving the rest to tell the story of the expedition.

"Buckingham, I'm afraid that we will have to get out!" the alcalde exclaimed, with a weary air, throwing himself into a chair.

"Well, I don't know about that, it is a doubtful question as to what is the best course to be pursued," the ex-Danite replied, thoughtfully.

"Of course we are not quite as much in the dark as the rest of the town," he continued.

"We know why these blows are falling, thanks to the warning we received through Golightly, and, alcalde, don't you think we acted wrongly in not warning Sharp Bill that his life had been threatened?"

"If we had spoken it would have placed him on his guard, and he might not have been surprised and slain as easily as he was."

"Oh, yes, we ought to have warned him, that isn't the least doubt about that."

"Let me see, Soapy Sam is the next on the list?"

"Yes, he is number two, you're number three and this devil reserves me for the last, curse him!" and the Mormon elder glared around him in impatient rage.

"I'll call Sam and let him understand just what is ahead of him," King Hiram said, rising.

"He is a bold and desperate man, despite his smooth and oily ways, and, maybe, if he is warned and on the lookout for danger he may be able to get the best of the fellow when the attack is made."

Oakham shook his head, his spirits had been so much depressed by the startling occurrences of the last few days that he had about come to the conclusion it was almost impossible for any one to succeed in getting the best of the secret and merciless slayer.

When King Hiram opened the door he caught sight of Soapy Sam a short distance down the street, engaged in discussing with a knot of the citizens the particulars of the strange and bloody mystery that had so astonished the camp.

Buckingham hailed him, and Sam in obedience to the summons entered the alcalde's office.

Briefly King Hiram explained to the other how matters stood, and the face of Barrington became extremely solemn as he listened to the narrative.

"What do you think of it?" the ex-Danite asked in conclusion.

"Well, I ain't surprised," the other answered. "I had a suspicion, right from the first, that thar was more in the affair than appeared on the surface."

"You see, Yellow John's death didn't trouble me much, for he was a quarrelsome fellow, particularly when he got a leetle bug-juice into him, and it was only reasonable that thar should be plenty of galoots around who would be glad to give him a lick in the dark."

"But when it come to the death of Old Solitary it kinder made me open my eyes, for he was a quiet cuss who never made a practice of going around and treading on people's toes."

"I began to ask myself if the man who was striking these blows wasn't some enemy of our old-time band, and when to-day Sharp Bill was laid out with his toes turned up, I began to feel sure of it."

"I was kinder in hopes that if the trouble came on account of that bloody affair on the Virgin river, I wouldn't be drawn into it, for if you remember, alcalde, I only joined the band on the night of the tragedy, and getting skeered of my share in the work arter the deed was done, I lit out next morning."

"It was jest accident, I reckoned, that brought me to this camp, for I hadn't any idea that you or any of the boys were within a hundred miles of it, but now that this hyer thing has come out, I begin to believe it was fate."

And the voice of the old-time Destroying Angel grew so solemn that it fairly made the Mormon elder shiver.

"Don't talk such cussed nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"Thar's no fate about it—jest pure accident, that's all, and this iron-dagger chap is only human and he can be killed as well as anybody, provided we can get at him."

"Yes, as a general rule you've got to catch your bird before you can put salt on its tail," King Hiram observed, dryly.

"Well, alcalde, I ain't a-going to dispute with you; it may be accident and it may be fate, but it's bad enough whichever it is, and I'm going to do my level best to keep out of the way of this galoot who is so free with his iron daggers," Soapy Sam remarked.

"I ain't a bit anxious, either, to avenge my pard's. All that I calculate to do is to look arter myself as well as I kin."

"What's your programme?" asked the alcalde, earnestly.

"I'm going to skip, and I sha'n't put myself out to go round and bid my friends good-by, either."

"The camp will wake up some morning and find me among the missing, and whether I've gone to Hades or to Halifax I don't calculate to let anybody know."

"Sam has got the right idea of it!" the Mormon elder declared. "We can only avoid this bloodthirsty demon by flight."

"I don't agree with you," the ex-Danite remarked. "Both of you can go if you like, but as far as I am concerned I intend to stay hyer and face the music."

The others shook their heads; the decision was not to their taste.

A few more words of no particular importance and the conference broke up.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE ALCALDE'S PLAN.

HAVING come to the decision that it was best for him to emigrate, the Mormon elder did not allow the grass to grow under his feet.

Under pretense that the safety of the town required a police force, he organized a body of ten policemen, taking particular care to pick the best fellows in the town.

Buckingham accepted the command of the squad, for, as he said to the alcalde:

"For old times' sake I'll stick to you while you need my services, but I will not accompany you in your flight."

"I'm tired of life anyway, and I don't care whether I live or die, and if it is my fate to fall by one of these iron daggers, so be it."

"I will not attempt to avoid such a death by flight."

"But, Jonathan Oakham, if you had listened to my advice at the time of that Virgin river trouble, you would not now be obliged to fly for your life like a thief in the night."

"I told you to let the woman alone; she didn't take kindly to your Mormon notions, and you were only wasting your time in pursuing her."

"You were bull-headed and would go your own gait, and the result you now know."

"Don't you wish you had taken my advice?"

"Indeed I do, Hiram; I was a fool, and dearly have I paid for my folly."

"And if this road-agent jabs one of his iron daggers in you, you will pay still dearer."

"Don't speak in that infernal flippant way!" the alcalde exclaimed, nervously.

"It's the truth, and you might as well face it, elder; you can't make anything by closing your eyes to facts."

"And I think now you are again going to make an idiot of yourself."

"How so?"

"About this girl—the blacksmith's daughter."

"What of her?"

"I presume from the preparations you are making that you intend to take her with you."

"Yes, such is my intention, if I can arrange with the old man."

"Don't you know that the girl don't care two cents for you?"

"She's only a child, Hiram, not old enough to know her own mind. She'll like me well enough after we get away together," the Mormon elder replied, in his smooth, oily way, rubbing his hands softly together.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed the other, sharply. "Why do you want to try any of that stuff on me? Don't you suppose I know you? Bah! that kind of talk may do to pull the wool over the eyes of your ignorant Mormonites, but it's useless as far as I am concerned."

"You don't care a snap of your finger whether the girl likes you are not, so long as you can succeed in getting her."

"But I tell you, right hyer and now, that you're making a mighty foolish move!"

"How so?" exclaimed the alcalde, getting red in the face, for he was annoyed at this plain talk.

"In the first place, any man is a fool to bother with a woman who don't care for him, and then the girl has a lover, this schoolmaster, and I warn you, alcalde, and if you're wise you'll heed my words, that young fellow is a dangerous man."

"Thar's not another one in the town that I wouldn't rather have for an enemy if I had any choice in the matter."

"If you take the girl that man will be after you, and if he don't get her he'll have satisfaction out of you, anyway."

"Oh, I've calculated all those chances," the alcalde replied, with a cunning leer. "Don't you be worried about that. I know what I am up to."

"Haven't I a body-guard, and won't they make short work of the schoolmaster if he attempts to interfere with me in any way, hey?"

"Well, say that you are all safe as far as he is concerned; why is it that you are leaving the camp?"

"Why do you ask such a question? You know well enough!" the alcalde exclaimed, tartly.

"It is to escape from this fiend with the iron daggers, who seems to take an unholy pleasure in his bloody work."

"You flee to escape him?"

"Yes, certainly, of course."

"Do you think it wise then to burden your flight with a woman?"

The Mormon elder looked annoyed.

"Oh, she won't bother me any."

"Yes, she will—most certainly she will impede your flight. If you are wise and really wish to throw this secret sloyer off the track, you will depart by night and take only four or five well-armed men with you."

"My idea would be to cover at least fifty miles without halting any more than was absolutely necessary, and upon the start I would divide my party up so as to blind the trail as much as possible and render pursuit difficult."

"And I should keep up the speed until I got into civilization again and within striking-distance of a railroad. Then let your men go, take the train without letting a soul know of your plans, and if you are wise you will put the sea between you and this land."

"In my judgment that is your only chance of escape, but if you go lugging a woman around with you I wouldn't give the flip of a dollar for your life."

The Mormon elder shook his head. He was an old-fashioned man, and the counsel although he could not gainsay its wisdom, did not please at all.

He had become infatuated with the pretty English girl and was determined at all risks to become her lord and master.

And then, too, although his common-sense told him that he stood a far better chance of escaping by pursuing the course indicated by King Hiram, yet his passion for the girl made him willing to run considerable danger for the sake of possessing himself of this sweet English flower.

The lip of Buckingham curled in contempt.

"You don't approve of my advice?" he said.

"Oh, yes, it's good enuff; I've no doubt 'bout that, but the fact is, I am struck after this girl and I am willing to encounter considerable danger providing I can secure her."

"Well, thar's no accounting for tastes," King Hiram remarked with a shrug of his massive shoulders.

"For my part I should much prefer life without the woman to death with her."

"Yes, yes, but I don't think it is as bad as that," the alcalde protested.

"All right, I'm through; thar isn't any use in wasting words upon a man so determined to thrust himself into danger as you seem to be."

"You don't do me justice," the Mormon elder replied.

"If I didn't think that thar was a fair chance for me to pull through I wouldn't try it."

"You don't seem to understand that you are dealing with a foe so powerful that you cannot afford to throw away a single point in the game; a single error may cost you your life, and yet, for the sake of this girl you are going to be foolish enough to take the chances."

"It's no use talking, Hiram, I've made up my mind to have the girl and I'm going to get her if I can," the Mormon exclaimed, as obstinate as a mule.

"Well, if the Iron Dagger gets you then you'll have the consolation of knowing that you can't blame anybody but yourself."

The elder looked glum at this remark but contented himself by replying:

"I reckon I'll pull through somehow," and then summoning his body-guard the alcalde started to visit the Englishman for the purpose of gaining his consent to part with his daughter.

The Mormon elder did not anticipate that there would be any great trouble in achieving this purpose, for he had sounded the blacksmith in regard to it some time before.

Golightly was one of those overhearing parents, so common abroad, who did not think that a girl should have any voice in such a matter.

It was his belief that the parent should select the husband and that it was the duty of the child to accept him without question.

He looked upon the Mormon elder as being a great man, and though he had heard ugly whispers in regard to Oakham's having about a dozen wives in different parts of Utah, yet, when the alcalde decried the reports and declared they were due to the malice of his enemies, the Englishman credited the statement.

Then, too, the wily Mormon had appealed to the avarice of the blacksmith.

In a careless, off-hand way he had told Golightly that when he married his daughter he should consider it his duty to help him to the fullest extent of his power, and had clinched the matter by saying that the day the pretty Susan consented to be his wife he would take a great deal of pleasure in presenting his future father-in-law with five hundred dollars.

The Mormon elder was a well-to-do man; he had feathered his nest finely during his sojourn among the saints, and he cared no more for his money than if it was so much water when a girl like Susan Golightly was concerned.

The detail of his interview with the blacksmith and his daughter we must leave until another chapter, while we, indulging in the author's privilege, take a leap a few hours ahead of old Father Time, and describe what happened to the Mormon desperado, Samuel Barrington, better known as Soapy Sam, when he essayed to steal quietly out of the camp of Babylon Bar just after midnight and took the southern trail down the San Francisco river, with the idea of making El Paso, crossing the Rio Grande at that point, and getting down into Southwestern Texas, where he trusted to be able to escape the pursuit of the mysterious road-agent, whose iron daggers had been so fatal to the Mormon desperadoes who had perpetrated the massacre of the Maxwell family on the banks of the Virgin river years before.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNDER THE MOON.

SOAPY SAM was a gentleman who, to use the popular saying, "had a head on his shoulders."

He did not go prancing 'round the town telling Tom, Dick and Harry that he designed to "slope" some dark night.

On the contrary he loudly expressed his determination not to rest until he had hunted down and exterminated the road-agent who had used his iron dagger with such deadly effect, and then he talked allot of stuff about what the men of the camp ought to do, until his listeners came to the opinion that Soapy Sam was about as good a man as they had in the town.

A shrewd observer though, who was well acquainted with the soft-spoken desperado, would have been apt to suspect that there was something in the wind, for Sam was not a man who was given to boasting of what he was going to do.

And on this very night when he had talked so loudly about what ought to be done, and what he intended to do, he had made all preparations for flight.

It was that very afternoon that he had learnt the full extent of the danger that had threatened him, and when he told the alcalde and King Hiram that the town would wake up some morning and find him among the missing, he had fully determined in his own mind that he would not tarry until another morning's sun should rise on the camp of Babylon Bar.

One of the miners had been trying to sell him a large gray mule for a week or so, but as there chanced to be a difference of opinion between the man and himself in regard to the price they had not made a trade.

But now he saw that he wanted the mule, and so he sauntered to the Saints' Rest, knowing that he would be likely to encounter the owner of the beast there.

He was not disappointed in this anticipation: the man immediately bantered him to buy the

mule, the two had three or four drinks together, and at last the trade was made and the mule changed owners.

There was a small shed at the back of the shanty occupied by Soapy Sam, and the beast was conveyed there and tethered.

Then the desperado provided provisions for the journey, for he had determined not to stop by the wayside until absolutely compelled to.

"The beast shall cover every mile that's in him before I draw rein!" Soapy Sam muttered, as he gave the mule a plentiful supper, preparatory to the journey.

For his own use Sam laid in a supply of crackers and smoked-beef, looked to his ammunition and saw he had a plentiful supply, and then as there wasn't anything else to be done he lounged around the hotel until midnight was near at hand.

In fact he was one of the last to leave the cheerful bar-room of the Saints' Rest, the others being three old soakers who did not manifest any intention of going home until the honest Dutchman almost turned them out into the street.

Sam shook hands with them, said he'd see them in the morning, and then turned down the street to his shanty.

And this wily Mormon desperado was on the alert too.

He was careful to walk in the middle of the street, and he carried his revolver in his hand ready cocked for action.

No foe could hope to surprise him by jumping out from behind a house and catching him un-awares.

But he gained his cabin without molestation, or even perceiving any cause for alarm.

He went in, closed the door and barred it behind him.

Then he sat down in the dark by the table which stood in the center of the cabin and waited.

"The devil's luck is in the thing if I don't git clear of the town to-night without anybody knowing it," he muttered, communing with himself, as the lazy-gaited minutes passed slowly away.

For a good hour he stirred not.

All sounds of life were hushed to silence, excepting that every now and then the mule moved restlessly in the shed.

"I reckon the town is as fast asleep now as it ever will be," he muttered, rising to his feet.

He stole cautiously to the portal and removed the bar, noiselessly opened the door a little so he could peep into the street.

The moon was up but there was a haze that obscured the rays of the silver queen of night, and so objects at any considerable distance were not plainly visible.

Soapy Sam had eyes like a hawk and ears like a rabbit.

But he could neither see nor hear anything to denote that there was anybody stirring in the camp.

"I reckon everything is all correct for me to make the raffle," he murmured, as he surveyed the vantage of the ground.

Then he took his saddle and bridle from where they hung on the wall and stole with noiseless steps to the shed where stood the mule.

The saddle was a Mexican one with secret pockets in it, where Sam had bestowed his extra ammunition and provisions.

It did not take him long to equip the beast for the journey, and then he cautiously led him out of the shed into the street and vaulted into the saddle.

The beast, who had not had any exercise to speak of for a week, would immediately have broken into a canter, but the fugitive restrained him.

"Hold on, you brute," he muttered; "go slow now as long as we are within the limits of the camp; when we git outside in the open country you kin sail away like a bird if you want to!"

With the utmost caution Sam rode through the town, but fortune seemed to favor him; not a soul did he encounter, and the animal he bestrode made scarcely more noise than a cat, her hoofs being unshod and the ground soft and yielding.

After he had got a few hundred yards beyond the last house in the town, feeling secure that the hoof-strokes of his animal would not now be overheard, he gave free rein to the beast, and the mule, prompt in obedience, cantered along at a good rate of speed.

It was an excellent riding-beast, the seat as easy almost as a rocking-horse, and Soapy Sam was sure he had got a bargain before the beast had covered a mile.

The light of the moon was growing stronger and stronger as the luminary mounted upward in the heavens, and by the time that he was a mile from Babylon Bar the haze had entirely disappeared and everything was almost as visible as by day.

"Good-by, old camp!" exclaimed the Mormon desperado, turning in the saddle and waving his hand toward the distant town, fast disappearing in the distance.

"It will be nigh onto a thousand years, I reckon, afore I set eyes on you ag'in."

The words were as true as ever came from the

lips of mortal man, and yet not true in the sense that he intended.

"Whoop her up, you beast, and show what kind of grit you've got into you!"

The beast sprung forward at increased speed. Ten minutes it cantered forward at a good gait, and then all of a sudden began to falter.

Sam endeavored to urge it on, and then he suddenly became conscious that the brute was getting lame.

A bitter curse came to his lips.

There wasn't any mistake about the matter: the horse was getting lamer and lamer.

Soapy Sam dismounted.

The lameness was in the right fore-leg of the mule.

"She must have trodden on something, for I'll swear she was all right when she started," Sam muttered, totally at a loss to account for the strange affair.

Then he lifted up the hoof to examine it, and he made a discovery that caused the cold perspiration to start from every vein.

The brute had been tampered with.

A small, strong nail had been driven into the hoof, and the pressure of the mule's weight upon it had gradually driven it up into the quick, laming the beast.

"A trick—a trick, and when was it done?" Soapy Sam cried, as he released the mule's leg and stood again upright.

"It's no go, Soapy Sam, you're my mutton, and I've no notion to allow you to escape me by any of these fly-by-night tricks!" cried a hoarse voice, and the well-known white-robed figure of the disguised road-agent stepped from behind a rock, where he had evidently lain concealed.

Quick as thought the Mormon desperado pulled his revolver out, but the road-agent was quicker still.

By the time that Soapy Sam got his pistol to the level the road-agent fired.

There was a hollow groan, a tossing aloft of arms, and the fight was done.

A surprise awaited the mining-camp when the citizens rose on the following morning.

Tethered to a post in front of the Saints' Rest stood the mule, and on its back, tied spread-eagle fashion, was the body of the Mormon desperado, Soapy Sam, and in his breast was buried one of the iron daggers now so well known to all the people of Babylon Bar.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DISCOVERY.

As it happened, Tom Breckenridge, Long Tom, was the first to discover the body.

And this was because he was, as a rule, the first one in the town to get up in the morning, and it was his invariable custom to go direct to the river for the purpose of taking a wash.

His cabin was about a hundred feet up the street above the hotel, Dutch Jake's "Saints' Rest."

Long Tom had been in a poker game on the preceding evening, and had drank more whisky than was usual with him, so on this particular morning he arose feeling as if his head was about twice as large as usual.

"Durn that old beat of a Major Bum!" he exclaimed, as he sat on the edge of his bunk, and contemplated his features in a small piece of looking-glass, a fragment of a good-sized mirror.

It was the redoubtable major who had got Long Tom to play, and, incidentally to drink the whisky.

"If it hadn't been for him I would have been home and in my bunk by ten o'clock, instead of fooling my time away trying to skin an old sharp like him outen his ducats!"

Major Bum "had played it" upon Long Tom and three more miners in a way they despised.

The major had had trouble with Dutch Jake.

The landlord had agreed to "hang" the veteran up for his board for a week, and also to provide him with a fair amount of whisky.

The major had tried to get Dutch Jake to allow him ten drinks a day, but had finally compromised on five.

And everything was going on all right, until one of the busybodies, who are to be found everywhere, noticing that the major never showed the color of his coin, questioned the Dutchman about the matter.

Jake, with that peculiar honesty so natural to him, explained the bargain which he had made.

The miner "haw-bawed" at the idea, and promptly told the landlord that he was a fool—was being "played for a flat," and sundry other "encouraging" assertions of the kind, and the result was that Dutch Jake became angry and resolved to back out of his bargain.

Major Bum was disgusted when the Dutchman bluntly told him that he must pay "der monish" for his meals and drinks or go without.

By dint of shrewd questioning, he soon discovered who had made the trouble, and then set to work to repair the difficulty.

And the major did it, too.

He told Dutch Jake that the miner had been "shooting off his mouth" because he, the major,

had refused to go with him and drink at an opposition shop.

"And then he wanted to ring me into a leetle poker game, too!" the major explained.

"He was anxious to get a chance to win my wealth, and he was afraid that if I run a bill with you, old pard, that when I struck a winning gait, and was pulling the money in by the handfuls, I would spend my dust hyer in setting up the full and flowing bowl for the galoots of the town!"

"I jest despise any sich monkey tricks as that," the major declared, with a great deal of dignity. "I have known you a long time, Jake, old boy! You are of the kind of men whom it is safe to tie to, and you can bet your sweet life that no ornery cuss of a no-soul miner is going to get me away from you."

"No, sir-ee!" exclaimed the major in lordly heat. "No man kin git me to go back on you, no how they kin fix it!"

"You have allers been my friend and backer—you are the clean, white article, and no mistake! and we native Americans must stand by each other or we will be ruined by these blamed foreigners."

"Desert a man of your size? Never! never in these boots!" the major cried.

"I say it, mind you, and I say it boldly—you can count on me every time!"

"Don't you take my word for the grub and fire-water? and when you remind me of it—on a Tuesday, generally, if I remember rightly—don't I allers pony up? or if I happen to be short of cash, don't I tell you to be sure and chalk it down and remind me of it on the coming Tuesday?"

"Yaw, yaw, das vos so," Dutch Jake assented.

"And do you think that if I strike it rich, and have more lucre than I know what to do with, that I am going back on a man and a brother like yourself, who has stood by me like a Trojan for good or ill?"

"You don't know what a Trojan is, Jake, I suppose, but it does not matter. It 'goes' all the same."

"But the very thought of such base ingratitude affects me more than words can tell!" Major Bum declared in a voice full of pathos.

"Really, Jake, you will have to set up a little whisky, or else I never shall be able to control my emotions."

And the major's protestations made such a deep impression upon the landlord that he hastened to set out the bottle and glasses, and took a little drink himself in order to show the major that he appreciated his "patronage."

Perceiving that he had made a "ten-strike" the major was quick to improve the opportunity.

"Some of these galoots in this town think they can pick me up for a flat, but if they once sat down in a little poker-game with me I would be willing to bet my eternal existence that I could skin them as clean as a whistle, and not half try either."

"Ah, if I only had five ducats, in either coin or dust, it is dollars to doughnuts that I could turn them into a hundred before the night wends its way to its eternal tomb!"

"Say, Jake, old boy, go me a fiver, jest for greens!" the major suggested, leaning on the counter and winking in a mysterious manner at the Dutchman.

"Plank me down five good solid ducats, and see me clean out these miserable galoots who have the gall to come into this hyer first-class shebang of yours and go for to making mouths at you behind your back."

"I am your friend, Jake," the major continued, earnestly, and with a solemn shake of the head.

"And being your pard, you know, I don't intend to allow no ornery cusses to abuse you while I am around."

"By jinks! I vas der kind of mans v'at treats everybody well, and der man v'at goes back on me is a big John donkey all der while!" the honest Dutchman asserted.

"That is so!" Major Bum declared. "You never said a truer word in your life and it is enough to make a man weep jest for to think that any cuss should be so mean as to say a word ag'in' a good clean white American such as you are, Jake, but I am the man to take it up, you bet!"

Then the major swelled out his chest and brought his fist down with a vigorous bang on the counter.

"Jest you back me to the extent of five solid cases—five big round dollars, and I'll make these farnal galoots hunt their holes so quick that they will never know how they got into 'em!"

And, strange to say, so great was the influence the redoubtable major possessed over the landlord, that Dutch Jake listened to "the voice of the charmer," produced five dollars and banded them over to Major Bum.

"Dere vas der cash, now you go in mid yourself and skin der mans dat vants to make foolishness mid me!" the honest Dutchman exclaimed.

"I'll do it, Jake!" Major Bum exclaimed in an impressive way, as he rattled the dollars in his hand.

"Aha! do you hear that music?" he cried. "Doesn't that beat all the opera singers that were ever hatched!"

"Yes, yes, dat vas music, sure as you vas born!" Dutch Jake asserted.

Then, so thoroughly was the landlord under the spell of Major Bum's persuasive eloquence, he invited the veteran to have a drink, and the two clinked their glasses in the most sociable manner.

Now to do Major Bum justice, he was not boasting when he declared that he was satisfied he could clean out the miners in a poker game.

The veteran was an excellent poker-player, and it took a first-class man to beat him, so when the miners made the mistake of thinking that because the old man was considerable of a blowhard he would be an easy mark at cards they were greatly in error.

There were five of them sat down to play and by the time that midnight was reached the major had all the money there was in the party.

When the miners departed in disgust for their cabins the major took a sociable drink, a night-cap he termed it, with Dutch Jake.

He paid back the five dollars he had borrowed and let Dutch Jake have "ten cases" as the major termed them, on account.

"I usually settle with you Tuesday," the veteran explained in his lordly way. "But as I have the money in hand I might as well give it to you now."

"Ah, yes, dat vas goot, but since you are so flush why do you not pays me more, hey?" asked the landlord, shrewdly.

"Aha! Jakey, me boy, it is a cold day when you get left!" he exclaimed.

Then he winked in a mysterious way, leaned over the counter and whispered:

"I have got a leetle scheme in my head and to carry it out I must have money, but it will fetch in a big pile if I carry it out all right."

"Yes, yes, I see!" and the Dutchman closed one eye, and then winked with the other after the major's fashion.

"In fact, I may say that I have two or three little schemes in my head, and you can bet a gold mine that I will pull big money out of some of them."

The saloon-keeper nodded, and grinned. He always had an idea from the beginning of his acquaintance with the major that he was a great man, and this successful coup of the veteran's did not surprise him.

"And, Jakey, old pard, this game to-night was a good thing for you too, eh?" the major said with another knowing wink.

"The bar took in some money which, mebbe, it would not have got, and so it panned out all right, all around."

The Dutchman admitted that the poker game most certainly had contributed to his profits, and then in an unwonted fit of generosity he invited the veteran to have another drink, after which they went to bed.

Notwithstanding his potations the major was up early in the morning, and he came out of the hotel only a minute or so after Long Tom reached the spot where the mule was tied which bore so awful a burden upon its back.

"What in tarnation is this hyer thing?" the major cried.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

"THERE has been bloody murder done!" the miner exclaimed in an awe-struck tone.

"Durn me if the cuss with the iron daggers ain't been up to his tricks ag'in!" the major cried.

"What had we better do?"

"Don't touch the thing!" the veteran warned. "Let us give the alarm and rouse the camp. This hyer is mighty ticklish business, and we don't want to get mixed up in it without there is a gang round so that no galoot will get the suspicion that we had anything to do with sending the cuss to Kingdom Come."

"You are right," Long Tom assented. "A man can't be too keeful how he moves when he runs up ag'in' any trouble of this kind, and you can bet all you are worth that I don't want to have any sporn in the soup."

"That is where you are wise!" the major declared. "I have known a heap of men who did right well in this world jest by going quietly along and attending to their own business."

"Now then as this hyer thing is fixed so it can't get away, we are safe to leave it while we give the alarm," the veteran continued.

"The alcalde ought to be notified, I s'pose?" Long Tom remarked.

"I will rouse him up."

"That's right! and I will wake the folks in Dutch Jake's shebang!" the major exclaimed.

The two started upon their missions.

The house of the alcalde was at the upper end of the town, and just before Long Tom came to it he encountered King Hiram.

Knowing that the dark-robed Mormon was the right-hand man of the alcalde the miner related to him the particulars of the awful discovery which he had made.

King Hiram was thoroughly astonished and

his dark face grew darker than ever as he listened to the tale.

"It hardly seems possible that this can be true," he commented in his stern way.

"I would not have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!" the miner protested.

While Long Tom had been telling the story the Mormon leader had turned his gaze in the direction of the hotel.

He was not so far away but what he could plainly distinguish the mule with the man tied on its back, but not near enough to recognize the features of the unconscious rider.

"And the iron dagger is in his breast?" King Hiram questioned, a savage glare in his dark eyes.

"Yes, sir-ee!" Long Tom exclaimed, "jest the same kind of an ugly tool as the other fellers was killed by."

"I was jest a-going to rouse the alcalde," the miner continued.

"That is a wise move, but as I am going to his house I will attend to it."

"All right!"

"Suppose you return to the body and warn everybody not to touch it until the alcalde comes so that a rigid investigation can be made."

"Very well, I will do it."

"If any one manifests any desire to meddle with the matter, say it is the alcalde's order that neither the mule nor the body shall be touched until he comes."

"I will attend to it, and I reckon that when I put my foot down that nobody is to consarn themselves about the biling, thar won't be many men in the camp who will dare for to interfere!" the miner exclaimed in a warlike way.

Then he hurried off in the direction of the hotel.

The Mormon leader watched him for a few moments, a gloomy look upon his dark, expressive face.

"The blow has fallen sooner than I expected," he mused.

"And it is a strange thing that this mysterious murderer should have been able to intercept so cunning a rascal as Soapy Sam in his flight."

"It shows that he is a man possessed of uncommon skill, and the fact warns the alcalde and myself to be on our guard."

Then the speaker proceeded to rouse Oakham.

The elder was a sound sleeper, and King Hiram was obliged to bang at his door for a couple of minutes before he succeeded in waking the Mormon elder from his slumbers.

"Hello! What is up—what's the matter?" Oakham inquired.

"Open your door—misfortune knocks!" King Hiram exclaimed, in his peculiar, saturnine way.

"Eh, what is that? What the deuce do you mean?" Oakham exclaimed, puzzled by the strange reply, and as his senses were still clouded by sleep he had not recognized the voice of the speaker.

"Open! it is I, Hiram Buckingham!" the other announced.

"Oh, yes! all right! Why didn't you say so at first, and not go to talking any such trash as about misfortune knocking, and all that sort of thing? Just wait a moment until I get into my clothes!" the elder replied.

"All right—no hurry—take your time," King Hiram remarked.

And then the dark-faced desperado laughed grudgingly to himself.

"Wait until he hears the news of this tragedy and then I fancy he will think that I was not far out of the way when I announced that misfortune was knocking at his door."

In about five minutes the sound of the Mormon elder taking down the heavy bar which guarded his portal came to the ears of the applicant for admission, then the door opened and Jonathan Oakham appeared.

"What on earth roused you out of your bed so early?" the elder exclaimed.

"Anything up?" he questioned, after he got a second look at the face of the other, for he fancied from the expression on Buckingham's features that he was troubled.

"Take a look down the street—do you see that object in front of the hotel?" King Hiram queried.

"Yes, it is a mule, with a man tied on its back, apparently!" exclaimed the alcalde, in astonishment, after he had taken a good look in the direction indicated.

"It is too far off for you to recognize the man?"

"Yes, I can't make him out."

"It is Soapy Sam," King Hiram declared, in his gloomy way.

"You don't mean it?" the Mormon elder exclaimed, full of astonishment.

"Yes, it is the truth."

"But what is the matter with the man? Is he drunk, and is this some trick the boys have played on him?" Oakham asked, greatly puzzled.

"No, he is not drunk, and there is no joke about the matter."

"What does it mean!—explain if you know!" the alcalde cried.

"The man is dead!"

"Dead!"

"Yes."

"You don't mean it!" the other exclaimed, his face and voice both full of horror.

"It is the truth, and in his breast is an iron dagger."

The Mormon elder caught his breath and turned deadly pale.

"Say, Hiram, this isn't a joke that you are playing on me?" he asked in trembling tones.

"You haven't got this thing up just to scare me a bit, eh?" And the Mormon leader looked anxiously into the face of the visitor as he put the question.

"Oh, no, it is a sure enough thing," Buckingham replied.

"I am astounded!"

"Yes, it is enough to astound any man."

"And Soapy Sam has been killed by this mysterious assassin," Oakham remarked, slowly, and he shook his head in a doubting way, just as though he could not really bring himself to believe that it could be true.

"Long Tom, who discovered the body, says that there is an iron dagger buried in the breast of the murdered man."

"You have not examined the body yourself then?" the Mormon elder asked.

"No, I met long Tom on his way to arouse you as I came out of the house, so I told him I would attend to that job and sent him back with instructions to allow no one to touch the body until we came."

"That was wise, for an examination may give us some clue to the murderer."

King Hiram shook his head.

"You don't think so?"

"Not likely, for this unknown murderer is too cunning to allow anybody to get a clue so that he can be tracked."

"He certainly has played his game remarkably well, but the most skillful of men make mistakes sometimes, you know."

"Oh, yes, that is very true, and we must be on the lookout to take advantage if he happens to blunder."

"There is no question but what he has managed matters so shrewdly that so far we have not been able to get the slightest clue as to who or what he is, or where he conceals himself, but there is an old saying, you know, that the pitcher which goes often to the well will be broken at last."

"Yes, I see what you are driving at, and there is no doubt that there is a good deal of sense in the argument," King Hiram remarked.

"Because a man succeeds in doing a trick of this kind three or four times, and manages to get away all right, it is no sign that he can always be as lucky," the elder observed.

"No doubt about the truth of that," Buckingham assented.

"In fact the more often a man plays a game of this kind, the greater becomes the chance of his being caught, for constant practice at this sort of thing does not make a man more proficient," the desperado continued.

"Oh, no, certainly not!"

"By the way, it is our turn next," King Hiram observed with a gloomy smile.

"For heaven's sake don't talk about it!" the Mormon elder exclaimed.

"Makes you a little uneasy, eh?" the other remarked, grimly.

"Yes, it certainly does!"

"After the hirelings comes the master," the old-time Danite observed, reflectively.

"Don't you give me the shivers!" Oakham cried, nervously.

"There is only one hireling left—myself, and when I go under, then comes your turn."

"Don't creak any more!" the Mormon elder exclaimed. "Come on, and let me examine the body!"

CHAPTER XXXV. THE EXAMINATION.

By the time that the two reached the side of the animal, who bore such a strange burden on his back, there were fully twenty of the townsmen in the neighborhood.

All news travels fast, and it did not take long for the report to circulate through the town that the mysterious road-agent, the man of the iron daggers, had again selected a victim.

It was an awe-struck throng which surrounded the body of the old-time Mormon desperado.

"This is a fearful thing, fellow-citizens," Oakham remarked with a weighty shake of the head.

Then the rest all shook their heads to, and each man looked at his neighbor in a questioning way.

"Who was the first to discover the body?" the alcalde asked.

"I was," Long Tom responded, promptly.

"I am, as a general thing, 'bout the first man up in the town, and I ailers makes a break for the river so as to wash the cobwebs out of my eyes."

"Ah, yes, I see," Oakham remarked. "And when you came out of the house this morning you beheld this fearful sight?"

"Yes, sir-ee, that is what I did!"

"And was the animal, and the body, just as they are now?" the alcalde questioned.

"Jest the same."

"I kin bear witness to that!" Major Bum declared with an air of great importance.

The veteran had an idea that it was about time that he took part in the proceedings.

"I came out of the hotel just about the same time that my esteemed friend hyer, Mister Breckenridge, arose on the spot."

"That is so," the miner assented.

"And the moment I saw what had taken place I cautioned him not to touch the mule, or the body, but to let everything be just as it was until your Honor, the alcalde, should put in an appearance," Major Bum announced.

"That was right," the Mormon leader remarked. "Nothing should be touched until a regular examination could be made."

"That is just what I said, hey! Mister Breckenridge?" the veteran asked in a pompous way.

"I reckon that was the way you put it," the miner answered.

"Then Mister Breckenridge started to break the intelligence to your Honor while I went to rouse the citizens at large," Major Bum explained.

"I don't suppose anybody else here knows anything about the matter," the alcalde asked, looking at the crowd in an inquiring way.

The miners looked at each other, and then one and all shook their heads.

"Thar wasn't a soul in sight when I came out of my cabin," Long Tom volunteered.

"That is correct!" Major Bum declared.

"For I can bear witness that when I made my appearance from the hotel Mister Breckenridge was the only man around."

"Does anybody know anything about the mule?" King Hiram asked. "It wasn't Soapy Sam's beast," he added. "For I know he didn't own one."

As it happened, the man who had sold the murdered man the mule was present and he immediately explained the transaction.

The alcalde and King Hiram exchanged glances, for they comprehended why Soapy Sam had bought the animal.

"I suppose, alcalde, that the best thing to be done under the circumstances is to take the body from the mule into one of the cabins and have a careful examination made," King Hiram suggested, perceiving that the Mormon elder was rather at a loss how to proceed.

"Yes, I suppose that is what ought to be done," Oakham coincided.

"And we might as well take him to his own cabin," the alcalde continued.

"Yes," King Hiram agreed. "I will lead the least."

He unbitched the mule and led the beast up the street, the alcalde and the crowd keeping him company, but before he had proceeded a dozen steps, the man who had formerly owned the mule set up a shout.

"Doggone it! if the beast ain't pretty nigh to being dead lame!"

Buckingham cast his eyes upon the animal, saw this was correct, and halted.

"It is mighty strange though!" the former owner of the beast declared. "For he was all right yesterday, and when I delivered the beast to Sam he was as sound as a dollar."

"Soapy wasn't no fool, your Honor, but as sharp as they make 'em, and you can bet your bottom dollar that he would not have taken the mule if there had been anything the matter with him," the man continued.

"Probably got a thorn in his beof," one of the bystanders suggested.

"Some of you men who are around in horseflesh take a look at the animal," the alcalde suggested.

One of the miners immediately remarked that there wasn't a better judge of horses in the town than the man who had formerly owned the mule, and as this seemed to be the general opinion the alcalde called upon him to make the examination.

The man was considerable of a jockey, and it didn't take him but a moment to discover what was the matter with the mule.

"The beast has been lamed on purpose!" he announced. "Some blamed rascal has driven a little nail up into the hoof."

Then, being provided with a pair of pincers, it did not take him but a few seconds to remove the nail, which he held up for the inspection of the crowd.

Again the Mormon elder and the old Danite chieftain exchanged glances.

It was plain to them that Soapy Sam had been the victim of a carefully-devised plot.

Again the procession moved.

It halted at the cabin where the dead man had lived.

The ropes which bound the body to the beast were cut, and the mortal remains of the wily and desperate frontiersman was carried into the cabin and placed in the rude bunk where in life the man had slept.

Then a careful examination was made.

All the weapons of Soapy Sam had been taken, as well as his money, for not a single article of value was found on his body.

"The fellow made a clean sweep," the alcalde observed, in a disconsolate way.

"Yes, even the money-belt is gone," King

Hiram observed, "For I presume he wore a money-belt?"

"Certainly! It is safe betting that Soapy had a money-belt, and well-filled too!" Oakham declared.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the man who had owned the mule. "I sold Soapy a money-belt 'bout a week ago."

"I shot a deer 'bout a month back," he explained. "I worked some of the skin up into money-belts, and Soapy bought the best one of the lot."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt that he wore the belt and it had a good substantial lining too," the alcalde remarked.

"Well, whether the man had much, or little, it is certain that the fellow with the iron dagger has got away with it," King Hiram observed in a rather gloomy way.

The examination of the body revealed the fact that Soapy Sam had been killed by a revolver shot which had been fired with so accurate an aim as to cut the very heart of the Mormon desperado in twain.

It was the medical man of the camp, the eccentric Doc Provo, who made this discovery.

It was not the doctor's custom to rise at such an early hour in the morning, but a couple of the miners, impressed with the belief that his services would be needed in such an important case as this, had, without saying anything to anybody, taken upon themselves the task of rousing the doctor from his slumber.

But the pair did not succeed in getting the medical sharp out of his bunk without a deal of trouble.

It was the doctor's custom to get "as full as a tick" on Dutch Jake's whisky every night regularly.

But he was one of those steady drinkers whose locomotive powers were never entirely disabled by liquor, no matter how much he drank, so he was always able to get to his bed all right.

And it was a common thing for him to remark:

"Your uncle may get an awful big load on board, but he never takes more than he can get away with, and you never catch him lying down like a hog in the street."

This was the truth, but for all that the liquor made the doctor sleep fearfully sound, and the miners had an awful job to get him up.

He swore at them when they attempted to wake him in a manner which would have made a veteran mule-driver turn green with envy, and if they had not been the most patient of men, and satisfied too that they were doing exactly what ought to be done under the circumstances, it is safe to say that when they discovered what a difficult job they had undertaken they surely would have given it up.

But the pair were a couple of public-spirited citizens.

There was a big murder case on hand, and as there wasn't a doubt in their minds that the doctor's presence was absolutely necessary they were determined to "h'ist him out if it took a leg!" as one of them graphically observed.

The doctor made a fearful row, but as the pair stuck to him in the most faithful manner, they finally succeeded in getting him out of his bunk.

"I ought to murder both of you villains!" the doctor growled as he soused his face in a basin of water.

"The idea of coming and getting a gentleman out of his bed at that unholy hour in the morning!" he continued, rubbing his face in an energetic manner on a coffee sack which served him for a towel.

And the doctor growled and grumbled all the way from his cabin until he entered the one where the dead man lay.

It did not take the medical sharp long to get at the facts in the case.

Soapy Sam had been killed by a revolver ball, fired at short range, and the dagger wound in his breast had nothing to do with his death.

"That was a little bit of funny business which the man who killed him indulged in afterward," the doctor explained.

This ended the examination.

No doubt that Soapy Sam had fallen a victim to the mysterious man of the iron daggers, but in this case, as in the others, there wasn't anything to give a clue to the murderer.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN ALARMED PAIR.

THE alcalde was puzzled what to do.

And after the doctor made his report he said:

"Well, fellow-citizens, this case seems to me to be just like the other ones."

"Sam has been killed by this mysterious, murdering road-agent, and the man has contrived to do the work in such a way that there isn't any clue to the villain who did the deed."

"Would it not be a good idea to offer a reward for any information which would lead to a discovery of the murderer?" King Hiram suggested.

"Yes, I reckon that wouldn't be a bad notion!" the Mormon elder exclaimed, favorably impressed at once with the suggestion.

"A mighty good idea!" cried the man who had owned the mule.

"This hyer road-agent is a desperate cuss, of course, and it stands to reason that nobody is going to risk his life by a-trying to git on his tail without thar is a chance to make something," he continued.

"There is a deal of sound sense in that," Buckingham observed.

"Yes, yes!" chorused the bystanders.

"You are right," the alcalde observed. "It is not to be expected that a man will risk his life for nothing, and from the specimens that we have seen of this villain's work, it is apparent that he is no slouch."

"You kin jest bet your boots, gen'lemen, that he is up to the time of day!" Major Bum declared, impressively.

"There are plenty of men in the camp who are big chiefs on the war-path," King Hiram observed. "And if any of them got a fair chance at this dagger fellow, there isn't a doubt but what they would be able to hold their own."

"It is not reasonable, though, to expect a man to go into a fight of this kind without there is a good chance for him to make something," the old Danite chieftain continued.

"That is so, sure as yer born!" and similar assenting expressions came from the lips of the crowd.

"Of course I have only the same interest in this thing that any good citizen of the town ought to take," King Hiram remarked in an extremely plausible way.

"But as I think it is the duty of a man like myself, who has made plenty of money in a camp, to do all that he can to promote the prosperity of the town, I will offer two hundred dollars as a reward to any man who can capture, or kill, this red-handed road-agent assassin!" King Hiram declared.

A hum of applause came from the lips of the crowd at this offer.

"That is the way to talk!" the Mormon elder exclaimed, approvingly.

"Yes, yes!" cried half a dozen of the miners, who appreciated the public spirit displayed by King Hiram.

"Such an offer as that shows that Mr. Buckingham has the interest of the town at heart, and as the alcalde of the camp I am willing to follow any such lead as he has made," Oakham declared. "So, fellow-citizens, I will 'see' Mr. Buckingham's two-hundred-dollar offer and go him two hundred better."

"I will give a reward of four hundred dollars for the road-agent, alive or dead!"

There was a vigorous burst of applause at this speech.

"And, fellow-citizens, I don't mind saying to you, out and out, that I think I would rather have the fellow dead than alive, for my opinion of a road-agent is about the same as I hold of an Indian: the only good road-agent is a dead road-agent," the alcalde announced.

Again the crowd applauded.

"It seems to me, boys, that this is a pretty good offer," King Hiram observed. "And some one of you ought to be able to pick up this leetle six hundred dollars within the next week or so."

Then the miners looked at each other and nodded their heads, showing that they agreed with the speaker.

"Certainly it ought not to be such a difficult matter to catch this rascal!" the alcalde exclaimed in a confident manner.

"There has been many a road-agent before this one who went in to play the holdest kind of a game, and did succeed for a while in evading all efforts to capture him, but in the long run the man was sure to come to grief," the Mormon elder continued.

"And so in this case, fellow-citizens, the iron dagger fellow has done his work, and succeeded in getting away without leaving any trace," Oakham went on.

"But he can't keep it up, you know, for no man ever went in to play a game of that sort but what he got either nabbed or killed in the long run."

And the alcalde puffed out his fat cheeks and looked wise.

"The odds are big, fellow-citizens, that if you make a big break for this miserable murderer you will be able to hunt him to his hole!"

"Six hundred dollars would be good pay for three or four men, even if it took them a month to do the job," King Hiram suggested.

The miners nodded their heads in token that they believed this to be true.

"Well, fellow-citizens, there isn't much more to be done in this case," the alcalde remarked.

"We know how Soapy Sam came to his death and we know who killed him, so all we can do now is to bury the man and then do our best to catch the rascal who did the murder."

As no one had anything to suggest about the matter the proceedings were brought to a speedy close.

There was a little graveyard on the hillside, at the upper end of the town, and there Soapy Sam was buried, side by side with the others who had fallen by the hand of the mysterious road-agent.

The miserable, cowardly assassin, as the Mormons termed him, taking their cue from the alcalde, the avenger of a fearful deed of blood, to use his own words.

About all the camp were present to witness the funeral, and dark indeed were the faces of the Mormon elder and the ex-Danite brave as they beheld the clods of earth fall upon the remains of the fellow who had once been counted to be about the best man in the band.

When the crowd dispersed, Oakham and King Hiram returned to the camp in company.

No word was spoken by either one until the alcalde's house was reached, and then Oakham said:

"Suppose you come in, Hiram, and we will have a little talk over this matter?"

"All right, I am agreeable."

The two entered the alcalde's cabin, and Oakham closed the door carefully.

"Help yourself to a chair," the elder said, as he went to a closet in the rear of the room and got out a bottle and two tin cups.

"Have a drink?"

"I don't mind," King Hiram replied.

"I am not much of a drinking man, you know," the alcalde remarked, as he poured out a generous allowance of the whisky in one of the cups and then pushed the bottle over to his companion.

"And it is very seldom indeed that I take anything in the daytime, as about the only time I care to take liquor is just before I go to bed at night, but this infernal affair has so unnerved me that I really feel faint, and need a big drink of whisky to keep my spirits up," the alcalde explained.

"Yes, I see, it is the old joke: you are going to keep your spirits up by pouring spirits down," King Hiram remarked, in his grim way, as he helped himself to a good drink of the liquor.

"You are right," the Mormon elder replied.

"I say, Hiram, this affair is getting to be mighty serious," the alcalde continued.

"The man is most certainly getting uncomfortably near us," King Hiram assented.

"It is your turn next, you know," the alcalde said, and then he swallowed his liquor at a single draught.

"Yes, I have not forgotten," the other replied, also disposing of his whisky.

"Well, what do you propose to do about the matter?" the Mormon elder asked in a nervous way.

"You are not surely going to go quietly about your business and allow this miserable assassin to select some favorable moment when he may kill you at his pleasure?" Oakham continued.

"Oh, what do you want to talk in that way for?" the old Danite exclaimed.

"You ought to know me better than to suppose that I am that kind of a man."

"Of course, I did not think you would act in that way, but you are taking the matter so deuced quietly that I did not really know what to make of it."

"I am rather a quiet sort of man, you understand, and am not in the habit of doing much talking," King Hiram replied.

"But it is the old story, eh? you keep up a devil of a thinking."

"Yes, I have made my calculations in regard to this affair."

"I suppose you understand what kind of game Soapy Sam was trying to play?" King Hiram questioned.

"Well, no, I don't know as I do," the Mormon elder replied with a puzzled look.

"Soapy was so well satisfied that this iron dagger man would get him for his mutton if he remained in the town, that he made up his mind to run away by night without taking the trouble to say good-by to any one."

"Do you think so?"

"Certainly! Just look at the facts in the case and you will see that there isn't any doubt about it," the other declared.

"He bought the mule, then secured all his valuables, for the examination of the house revealed that he hadn't left anything behind that he could carry with him, and he was so afraid that the road-agent had spies in the town, keeping a watch upon him, that he did not even dare to trust us, his old pals, with the secret."

"I believe you are right," the alcalde observed, and he shook his head in a solemn way as though much impressed with the gravity of the situation.

"Sam always was a fellow who kept his plans pretty well to himself," King Hiram observed.

"Although he was quite a talker, yet he never was great for talking about what he was going to do."

"That is a fact!"

"The game he calculated to play was a good one," the old Danite observed in a reflective way.

"The deadly blows which this mysterious assassin had managed to deliver with such fearful results had made him think that the atmosphere of this town would not be apt to be healthy for him if he remained in it, and so he resolved to get out, but in order to baffle the secret avenger he determined to go without saying a word to any one in regard to his design."

"It was a good game and it ought to have worked!" the Mormon elder declared.

"Yes, but it did not, for the road-agent evidently had a watch on Sammy, and when Sam

bought the mule the rascal guessed just what game our old pard was going to play."

"And he set out to beat it, hey?" exclaimed Oakham with a deep sigh.

"Yes, and he succeeded!" King Hiram declared grimly.

"Sam waited until the camp was asleep, and then he lit out, but the road-agent had fixed the nail in the hoof of the mule so as to make it certain that the beast couldn't go far, and somewhere on the road he waited for Sam."

"And he got him—the miserable scoundrel!" the alcalde exclaimed with a groan.

"Yes, he got him!" No doubt about that! Plugged him for keeps with a revolver ball, and afterwards stuck the iron dagger in his breast, so that all might know whose hand it was that had done the deed."

"Then had the impudence to bring the dead man on the mule right into the camp!" Oakham cried.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE ELDER'S SCHEME.

KING HIRAM laughed in his grim way: very little merriment was there in the sound.

"You don't seem to understand, elder," he said. "This man is an ingenious fellow, and he is carrying out his plan of vengeance on strictly scientific lines."

"Eh? I don't see how you make that out!" the Mormon elder remarked.

"We are the chief sinners," King Hiram explained.

"You were the master—the man who planned the deed of blood—and I was the captain who led the band."

"We were all guilty of bloodshed, but in strict justice, my responsibility is greater than that of the men whom I led, and yours the greatest of all, for if it had not been for you there would not have been any trouble at all."

"Well, yes, I suppose that is the truth," the alcalde admitted, but he spoke with strong reluctance.

"The members of the band were merely common cut-throats who were always ready to work at their trade provided they were well-paid," King Hiram continued.

"Oh, yes, but why do you want to rake up these old matters?" the Mormon elder exclaimed, impatiently.

"What good does it do?" he asked.

"Merely to show you that this unknown foe is proceeding with a refinement of cruelty such as was common in the dark ages when they tortured a man to the verge of despair before they took his life."

"Ah, yes, I think I begin to understand what you mean," responded the Mormon elder with a very unhappy look on his face.

"When the fellow announced that first he would kill the hirelings and then the master, he anticipated that we would guess what he meant," King Hiram remarked in his dark, saturnine way.

"Then as the blows fell, when, one by one, he struck down the desperadoes whom I led, and you hired, to do the deed of blood, he fancied that in anticipation we would die a dozen deaths."

"Yes, yes! the miserable scoundrel!" the alcalde exclaimed.

"And he calculated rightly, too, for I have been on pins and needles ever since the infernal rascal struck his first blow!"

"It is just as I told you, the man is proceeding in a scientific manner to cause us all the suffering he possibly can before he gives us the final stroke which will send us to the other world," King Hiram remarked.

"Hang it all, man, don't talk in such a devilish cold-blooded way!" exclaimed the Mormon elder, jumping to his feet and pacing up and down the room.

"You fairly give me the cold shivers!"

"Why so?"

"Because you talk as if our doom was sealed—as if there wasn't any escape for us, and you may think that way, but I will be hanged if I do!"

King Hiram lay back in his chair and laughed in his peculiar dry manner.

"Oh, no, I don't believe it is quite as bad as that," he announced.

"I look at the matter in this way," the Mormon elder remarked.

"The scoundrel has managed to kill his men because he has been smart enough to take them unawares."

"Yes, that is certainly the truth," King Hiram assented.

"Now we are on our guard, and he can't play any little game of that kind on us."

"No, not if we use proper caution," the other remarked.

"Well, now, you can bet your life that he isn't going to catch me napping!" the alcalde cried with a vigorous shake of the head.

"Nor me, either, as far as that goes," Buckingham asserted.

"Then another point that I have noted—mark you, Hiram, I have been studying this thing as a scholar would study a deep and difficult problem—"

The dark-browed desperado nodded.

"And that is, each and every man has been killed after the shades of night have fallen on the earth."

"The darkness afforded the slayer a cover so that he might steal unawares upon the victim."

"Exactly! Well, now, Hiram, you can bet all that you are worth, or ever expect to be worth, that the fellow never gets a chance at me after nightfall!" Oakham declared.

"I have my body-guard, and though I am not afraid to go around the camp in the daytime unattended, yet not a foot will I stir outside the house at night without having two or three men with me."

"Your idea is a good one," King Hiram remarked in a thoughtful way.

"And if you work the trick after that fashion it will be difficult for the man to get at you, without he hides behind a cabin and takes a shot at you as you go by," the old Danite brave continued with a malicious smile.

"Confound it! Buckingham, why is it that you are always suggesting something that is so infernally unpleasant?" the Mormon elder exclaimed, very much annoyed by the speech.

King Hiram laughed.

"You are too sensitive, elder!" he retorted. "You ought not to allow a little thing like that to trouble you."

"I believe you do it on purpose, for you seem to take a delight in making me feel uncomfortable," the other remarked in a grumbling way.

"Well, Oakham, I don't think that there is any use in playing the ostrich in a case of this kind."

"I don't understand you," the Mormon elder replied, always dull of comprehension.

"Why, the old story says that when an ostrich is hard pressed he sticks his head into the sand, and not being able to see his enemies brings himself to believe that they do not exist."

"Now when men are situated as we are, with our lives threatened by a desperate foe who has plainly chown that he is an extra good fighter, it is but sheer folly not to take into account all the circumstances of the case so as to be prepared to meet danger, no matter in what direction it may come."

"Yes, you are right about that," the Mormon elder admitted.

"Now, if you surround yourself with a body-guard so the man can't get a chance to surprise you alone, it will be his game to take a shot at you."

"Ah, yes, I do not doubt it," and Oakham shook his head in a melancholy way.

"So you will do well to be on the lookout for such a movement."

"Yes, yes, I will, and you can depend upon it that I shall do my best to fix matters so the scoundrel will not be able to get at me."

"It would be wise for you to go ahead on that line."

"Ah, this is a world of trouble!" the Mormon elder declared, with a grave shake of the head.

"Oh, yes, no doubt of that, and man is as prone to evil as the sparks to fly upward, as I heard a Gospel sharp remark once on a time," King Hiram observed, with grim emphasis.

"Never was a truer word said," the Mormon elder declared.

"Now just look at this schoolmaster interfering in my affairs," Oakham continued. "Everything was going on so nicely too before he took into his head to go after the girl."

"Do you think you would have got her without any trouble if this young fellow had not come along?"

"Oh, yes, not a doubt of it!" the Mormon elder declared, emphatically.

"Of course, at first, the maid was a little inclined to be shy," he explained.

"I am not as young as I once was, Hiram, and therefore not as well calculated to make a favorable impression upon a young and giddy girl."

"That is true enough; you are no chicken, but the toughest kind of an old rooster!" King Hiram exclaimed.

"Well, well, I am not an old man by any manner of means," the other replied, tartly, and his tone showed that he resented the speech.

"In fact, I am right in the prime of life, and in the full possession of all my powers, so that any man who picks me up for a slouch will make the biggest kind of a mistake."

The old Danite chieftain laughed in his grim way.

"Well, really, elder, I didn't know that you had so much life in you," he observed.

"The next thing the camp knows you will be setting yourself up for a big chief and announcing that you can clean out any man in the town."

"You are joking now, of course, but jesting aside, Hiram, I can tell you that though I have never been engaged in any trouble since I have been in the camp, yet it would take a good man to get away with me, for in my younger days before I got religion and joined the Mormon church I used to be an ugly man to tackle."

"Well, you are certainly big enough, elder, and if you are not too fat you ought to be able to put up a good fight now."

"Oh, no, no, I am not fat!" the other declared. "All good solid muscle and bone!" and the speaker doubled up his fists and smote the air in pugilistic fashion.

King Hiram laughed.

"Oh, yes, you are big enough, as I said, but you have got a deal more fat on you than you think, I fancy."

"No, no, I am in splendid condition for a fight!" the Mormon elder asserted, swelling out his chest proudly.

"Possibly you are, and I may not be as good a judge of that sort of thing as I think I am," King Hiram remarked.

If Oakham had been a man of sound discernment he would have immediately seen from the way his companion spoke that Buckingham did not believe that he, the Mormon elder, was half as good a man in the pugilistic line as he supposed himself to be.

The alcalde was a dull, obtuse fellow, and had such a good opinion of himself that it would have taken very plain speaking on King Hiram's part to make him understand that his companion "took no stock" in his words.

"Yes, sir, I am in just a splendid condition to wade in and lick some man out of his boots!" the Mormon elder declared arrogantly.

Buckingham looked at the boasting elder a moment, and then perceiving that the man was really in earnest—at first he had got the opinion that Oakham was joking—he said in a quiet, but rather sarcastic way:

"If you feel like that you ought to go out and tackle some fellow; if you succeed in whipping him, then it is evident that you didn't make any mistake in thinking that you are a big chief, but if, on the contrary, you come out of the little end of the horn, it will be manifest that you made some mistake in the calculation."

"That is just what I intend to do!" the Mormon elder announced, not intelligent enough to understand that the other was rather inclined to sneer at his pretensions.

King Hiram was surprised by this declaration.

"Oh, you are going on the war-path, then?" he asked.

"Yes, I think that it is about time I showed a certain party that he made a mistake when he crossed my path!" Oakham declared in a boasting way.

King Hiram knit his dark brows and surveyed the Mormon elder with a questioning glance.

"Oh, yes, I mean it—mean every word of it!" Oakham declared.

"There is a man in this camp who has been unwise enough to get in my way, and I have made up my mind to pick a quarrel with him on the first possible occasion, so as to have a good excuse for hammering him until he can't stand."

"I suppose you mean the schoolmaster?" King Hiram remarked, slowly.

"Yes, he is my mutton!"

"And you intend to pick a quarrel with him?" the other asked, as though he had some doubts about the matter.

"That is just what I intend to do!" the Mormon elder declared in a loud and boastful way.

"There isn't any doubt in my mind, you know, that I can handle him without any trouble," Oakham continued.

"And if I can succeed in giving him a tangle good thrashing, it will not only take some of the conceit out of him, but it will be apt to make the girl think that he does not amount to much after all."

"Ah, yes, I see," King Hiram remarked in a reflective way.

"Well, if you can succeed in carrying out this little plan it may work in the way you suppose," the old Danite continued.

"I don't think there is a doubt about the matter!" the alcalde declared.

"And it will be a source of great satisfaction to me to be able to cut the comb of this impudent young cocksparrow," the Mormon elder exclaimed in a vindictive way.

"I do not doubt that he has done a deal of crowing since he had the luck to get away with Sailor Mike in the knife-fight," Oakham added.

"That was a pretty piece of work," King Hiram remarked with the air of a man who knew what he was talking about.

"Yes, but the most of the men around town are of the opinion that it was only by pure accident he succeeded in laying Mike out."

"That is correct; I have heard talk of that kind, but, elder, do you think the men who hold to that opinion would be willing to meet the schoolmaster in a knife-fight?" Buckingham asked shrewdly.

"It is one thing you know for a man to talk in such a fashion, and quite another to prove by his actions that he believes what he says is the truth."

"Well, I really can't say in regard to that," the Mormon replied.

"But, really, Buckingham, it is my opinion that the result of the fight was due more to accident than skill."

"Possibly so, but I cannot agree with you," King Hiram remarked in a blunt way.

"You see, elder, I have seen a good deal of

knife business in my time, and so I think I understand something about it.

"The reason that the schoolmaster whipped Sailor Mike so easily was that he understood how to handle his knife and Sailor Mike did not.

"The man who knows how to use a knife has just as much advantage in a fight over one who is not an expert, as the crack pistol shot has over a novice."

"Yes, I suppose so, but I don't know anything about this knife business, and so I don't propose to try the schoolmaster on in that line.

"My idea is to pick a quarrel with him and then settle the matter with our fists."

"And do you think you will find the schoolmaster to be an easy mark?" King Hiram inquired, a peculiar expression on his dark face.

"I most decidedly do!" the Mormon elder replied immediately.

"Just see the advantage that I possess over him in size and weight."

"Very true, but just consider the advantages he possesses over you in youth and quickness," the other argued.

"That doesn't amount to anything in my opinion," the alcalde retorted.

"Of course, he is considerably younger than I am, and, I presume, is quicker—somewhat quicker."

"In the knife-fight with Sailor Mike he was like lightning."

"Oh, you are overrating the man!" the Mormon elder exclaimed, impatiently.

"No, no—not at all!"

"Yes, you are, and it is my impression that I can hammer him to a stand-still with very little trouble!"

"Well, now, elder, I know you of old and I know that you are not a man who takes advice kindly from any one," King Hiram remarked.

"So, under the circumstances I am not going to waste my time by attempting to give you any, but I will waste breath enough to observe it is my opinion that if you undertake to thrash the schoolmaster you will find out before you have been long in the game that he is a far better man than you take him to be."

"Nonsense! I have got his measure and I know I can beat him without much trouble."

"All right; if you get a set-back you will not have anybody to blame but yourself," the other said, and there was a grim look on his face which seemed to say that he would not be sorry to see the other come to grief.

"Come on and I'll go for the fellow right away!" the alcalde cried.

"I'm with you!" King Hiram rejoined.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SEEKING A QUARREL.

ALTHOUGH King Hiram had taken the trouble to advise the Mormon elder that he was not wise in holding the schoolmaster too cheaply, yet in his heart he was not sorry to see the alcalde proceed in his obstinate, bull-headed way.

"He needs a lesson badly," the old Danite murmured to himself as he followed the Mormon elder from the cabin. "And unless I have made a great mistake in my estimate of the schoolmaster he is going to get one if he provokes that young fellow into a fist fight with him."

"Although I don't pretend to be a particularly skillful boxer, yet I have always managed to hold my own pretty well, and I don't think the alcalde would stand much chance with me in a fight to a finish, but from what I have seen of the schoolmaster's abilities I should not care to lock horns with him even in a fist fight."

The Mormon elder though was full of confidence in his own powers, and as they walked up the street he did not hesitate to express his belief that he would not have much trouble in getting away," as he termed it, with the schoolmaster.

"As I was saying, before I got religion I was a mighty ugly man in a scrap and I have downed some tarnal good men in my time."

"That was twenty years ago, possibly, and you must take into consideration that you have changed a great deal since that time."

"Oh, no, not much, I think!" the other exclaimed, confidently.

"Yes, you have, age saps a man's strength, you know, and takes the elastic spring out of his limbs."

"You are going up against a young man, and these regular pugilists, who make a study of this sort of thing, have a saying that 'youth will be served.'"

"Ah, that is all bosh, and I don't take any stock in it at all!" the Mormon elder declared.

"Why, this whipper-snapper is only a child compared to me, for I must be fully fifty pounds heavier than he is, and you can bet your life that when it comes to a fist fight it is the weight that tells."

"Elder, if this fellow gives you a good hiding I suppose you will be satisfied that you are not as good a judge about such matters as you think you are," King Hiram remarked in his blunt way.

"Ah, yes, but it is all nonsense, you know!" the alcalde declared, decidedly annoyed by the remark.

"It is absurd for you to talk in that way," the Mormon elder went on.

"In fact, the only fear I have about the matter is that I may not be able to get the fellow to fight me!" he added, in a blustering tone.

"Oh, well, I don't think you need to be at all alarmed about that," King Hiram remarked, with a sarcastic smile.

"Judging from the alacrity he displayed in meeting Sailor Mike it is safe to say that if you attempt to rope him into a fight you will not have merely your labor for your pains."

"You think then that there isn't any doubt about his being willing to stand up against me?"

"Well, as he was not at all backward about meeting Sailor Mike in what was intended to be a fight to the death, I don't see why he should hesitate to accept a chance to give you a thrashing," King Hiram replied in his sarcastic way.

"By thunder, old man, you speak as though he wouldn't have much trouble in getting away with me!" the Mormon elder exclaimed, irritated by the speech.

"Honestly, alcalde, I think the man can thrash you, and he will not have to work very hard to do it either," King Hiram replied, bluntly.

"Before you are an hour older I will show you that you don't know as much about this sort of thing as you think you do!" Oakham exclaimed, angrily, being very much annoyed by the doubt expressed by the other.

"That is, I will show you if I can succeed in finding the man."

"I think you will be able to do that without any trouble, for this tragedy has raised such an excitement in the camp that work is about suspended."

This was the truth.

The miners were congregated in little groups, discussing the mysterious death of Soapy Sam and wondering who would be the next man to fall by the hand of mysterious road-agent.

With the exception of the three men who were in the secret of the mysterious avenger's reason for striking his fearful blows, no one in the town had any idea why the road-agent should have chosen to play the role of the executioner.

But the alcalde, the master, King Hiram, the leader of the hirelings, and Sailor Mike, the last one of the band, knew well enough why it was that the destroyer had struck his fearful blows.

It was a great puzzle to the townsmen though, and many were the surmises indulged in by the people.

Dutch Jake's Saints' Rest was the general resort of the miners during their leisure hours, and in the immediate neighborhood of the hotel the crowd had congregated.

On such an occasion as this the veteran, Major Bum, came out strong.

Being a man of ideas he told the bystanders his opinion in regard to the tragedy, and made such an impression upon his hearers that he was invited to drink three times within fifteen minutes.

But when one of the townsmen suggested that as he had got a good head on his shoulders, he ought to be able to devise some plan to capture the bold road agent Major Bum immediately begged to be excused.

"Oh no, not if I know myself!" he declared.

"Somebody in this hyer camp may have lost this gentleman who has put up such a successful game, but I will be hanged if I have!"

"Oh, no, no road-agents in mine, thank you."

"But the little six hundred is worth collaring," suggested the man who had sold the mule to Soapy Sam.

"Right you are, my friend and backer!" the veteran declared with a polite bow to the other.

"Six hundred ducats is worth collaring! Why, my esteemed friend, you would be safe in betting your life that even a man who cares as little for money as I do, wouldn't turn up his nose at no six hundred cases, or a hundred solid silver chunks either for that matter, for we are all of us stuck on the coin!"

And here Major Bum grinned and winked in a knowing way at his auditors, and they grinned and nodded as though they were highly delighted by the speech.

"But the whole trouble with going for the six hundred is that it is a kind of a lottery, you see, a man might be lucky enough to catch on to the cash, and then ag'in, instead of the cases he might run up ag'in' one of these iron daggers, or a revolver ball, and that is where the trouble comes in, fellow-citizens!"

The crowd assented in audible tones to this conclusion, and the mule man was obliged to admit that to catch a road-agent of the style of the iron dagger man wasn't as easy as rolling off a log.

The alcalde and King Hiram arrived just as this discussion came to an end, and as Oakham perceived that the schoolmaster was within sound of his voice he thought he could not find a better chance to draw him into an altercation.

"Well, men, it seems to me that some of you ought to make a good try for the six hundred," the Mormon elder remarked.

Quite a number in the throng nodded assent, but no one seemed willing to volunteer.

"Some of you fellows who are anxious to get

up reputations for being big chiefs, ought to just jump at this chance," the alcalde continued.

The miners looked at each other, but no one said anything.

Perceiving the hesitation of the crowd, Major Bum could not resist the opportunity to get in the old joke.

"Well, well, this is most astonishing!" the veteran declared. "In all my born days I never saw men so backward in coming forward!"

This observation aroused a laugh, but none of the miners appeared to be willing to undertake the dangerous venture.

"I wonder that you don't hop forward and try this game, schoolmaster!" the Mormon elder exclaimed, addressing his conversation directly to the young man.

All eyes in the crowd were immediately fixed upon Martin Jarrilla, for there were few in the gathering who didn't know that the two men were rival suitors for the love of the blacksmith's daughter, and therefore there was bad blood between them.

"I am a good deal in the same fix as the stranger yonder," said the schoolmaster, nodding to Major Bum as he spoke.

"I haven't lost any road-agents."

"Are you afraid to venture on a desperate undertaking of this kind?" the Mormon elder exclaimed with a sneer.

The miners redoubled their attention, for it was apparent that the alcalde was disposed to be quarrelsome.

"Really, now, I don't think you ought to put such a question to me," the schoolmaster replied in a quiet way, but there was a slight flush on his cheeks and a gleam in his eyes which showed that his temper had been aroused by the words of the Mormon elder.

"Why not?" the alcalde questioned in an insolent and arrogant way.

"Because I have never made any pretensions to be a great chief," the schoolmaster replied.

"Nobody in this camp—or in any other, for that matter—has ever heard me boast of what a great man I am on the war-path, and therefore I don't see why I should be singled out as a man likely to volunteer to catch this mysterious desperado."

"Oh, I didn't know but the fact that you were lucky enough to win a victory over that poor, drunken fool, Sailor Mike, had given you the impression that you were one of the greatest men in the camp!" the Mormon elder remarked, with a very perceptible sneer.

"You are wrong, alcalde," the young man observed, in a cool and indifferent way.

"Although I did whip Sailor Mike, fairly and squarely, yet my head isn't in the least swelled by the circumstance, and as to his being a drunken fool, he was not drunk when I met him, as all the town can bear witness."

"Mike wasn't himself or else you would never have been able to get the best of him!" the alcalde cried.

"Is that your opinion?"

"It is!"

"Wasn't Sailor Mike as good a man as you could produce?"

"No, he wasn't!"

"Trot out your best man then and I'll see if I can't make as big a monkey out of him as I did of Sailor Mike!" the schoolmaster cried, defiantly.

"See hyer, young fellow, you are getting insolent, and I want you to understand that as I am the alcalde of this town I don't propose to stand any nonsense from you!" the Mormon elder cried, hotly.

"And I don't propose to stand any nonsense from you, either," the young miner retorted.

"I am a free-born American citizen, and I don't allow any man to walk over me, no matter who or what he is!"

"You are crowing pretty loud!" the alcalde cried.

"I am able to back up all I say."

"If I wasn't the alcalde of this town I should feel disposed to give you a lesson in manners which would be apt to last you for one while!" Oakham exclaimed, shaking his fist defiantly at the schoolmaster.

"Make believe for a while that you are not the alcalde—that you are only a plain, common citizen, such as I am, and then I will be ready to accommodate you in any way you want to have it," the young man retorted.

"I have a good mind to give you a lesson, for you need, one mighty bad!" the alcalde declared.

"Never spoil a good mind, alcalde!" the schoolmaster exclaimed in a bantering way.

"And as to lessons we can tell about that better after we get through our picnic."

"They call me the schoolmaster, you know, and, perhaps, it will be I who will give the lesson, and you know who will receive it."

"Well, just for a few minutes I will lay aside my official character so as to be able to give you about as good a thrashing as a man ever got!" Oakham declared in a menacing way doubling up his fists and "squaring off" at the young miner after the most approved style of the pugilistic art.

"Ah, you want to have it with fists, eh, and

not with weapons?" the schoolmaster observed, apparently not in the least alarmed by the threatening demonstrations of the other.

"Yes, fists are good enough for me!" the Mormon elder declared.

"I will be satisfied to hammer you as long as you are able to stand up."

"I ain't particularly anxious to kill you, but you have been putting on lots of airs in this hyer camp, and I think it is about time that some of the frills were taken out of you," the alcalde explained in an arrogant way.

"And you have concluded to undertake the job?"

"Yes, sir, I have!"

"Look out that you don't make a botch of it!" the schoolmaster warned.

"You may find out before you get through that you have made the same mistake that many a man of your style has made before."

"What do you mean?" cried the Mormon elder, glaring with angry eyes upon the other.

"Why, that you have bitten off more than you can chew!" the schoolmaster replied.

There was a laugh at this as the crowd formed a ring around the two.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN ASTONISHED MAN.

THE crowd were eager to witness the struggle, and it was the general opinion among the more intelligent of the bystanders that Jarrilla had not made a mistake when he suggested that the alcalde had bitten off more than he could masticate.

Even the better class of Mormons were of the opinion that the elder had made a great mistake in picking a quarrel with the schoolmaster.

Of course it was plain to even the dullest observer that Oakham had gone out of his way to bring on this fight.

There were a few stupid fellows in the crowd, coarse, ignorant men, who had so much faith in the Mormon leaders that they were ready to believe they could do almost anything, but these bigoted adherents of the elder were few and far between.

The sporting element of the camp, both Mormons and Gentiles, were of the opinion that Oakham was in for a thrashing, and the extent of the beating depended entirely upon how much sand the alcalde possessed; that is, how long he would be content to stand up and let the schoolmaster pound him.

The mule man was one of the keenest sports in the camp.

He was the kind of fellows who were always willing to bet upon almost anything, and on this occasion he was anxious to get an opportunity to win a little money.

But when he suggested to his neighbors that he was willing to risk a trifle on the fight, taking Martin Jarrilla for his choice, he found that though a few of the Mormons were inclined to the belief that the elder would prove to be too much for his antagonist, yet none of them were willing to put up their money to back their opinions.

The mule man was disgusted, and he did not hesitate—while the two men were preparing for the contest—to express his opinion to those in his immediate neighborhood.

As it happened there were three of the ignorant type of Mormon right at his elbow, men who were firmly of the opinion that the elder wouldn't have any trouble in thrashing his man, yet they wouldn't put up any money on the result, and this irritated the mule man.

"Say, now, what kind of blamed chumps are you fellows, anyway?" he exclaimed.

"Hyier is your Mormon elder almost big enuff to eat up the schoolmaster, and you fellers feel dead sure that he can do it too, yet you hav'n't got the sand to put up your rocks like gen'lemen on the fight!"

"Come on! brace up and have some style about you!" exclaimed the High Horse, who just at this time made his appearance on the scene.

Goldlace had slept late this morning, for he had been indulging in a "leetle game" of poker with some of the miners and the party had not broken up until the cold gray light of the coming dawn had begun to line the eastern skies.

So the High Horse had slept peacefully in his bed until this late hour.

When he came down for his breakfast, the sight of the groups of miners congregated in the street at once made him aware that something out of the common had happened.

And as he eat his breakfast, Dutch Jake's assistant, who attended to the restaurant part of the hotel, explained what had occurred, therefore by the time that Goldlace had finished his meal he was in full possession of all the particulars.

From the hotel door he had witnessed the arrival of the alcalde, and the old Danite chief, and had been near enough to overhear all of the conversation between Oakham and the schoolmaster.

And now that the two were about to test their prowess in a personal encounter the High Horse thought that it was about time that he made his appearance.

The Mormon elder and the schoolmaster had removed their coats, rolled up their sleeves,

tightened the belts around their waists, and were just about to advance to face each other when the High Horse joined the throng.

"Wal, now, boyees, you are going in for a leetle fun, I see, and I am glad I come, for thar isn't a two-legged critter on top of this hyer footstool who appreciates a picnic of this kind more than I do," Goldlace exclaimed.

The alcalde glanced at the speaker in anger for he hated the tall stranger almost as much as he did the young man who had dared to step into his path.

"You have come just in time to see your pard hyer get a good hiding!" the Mormon elder exclaimed.

"You don't say so!" cried the High Horse in a tone indicative of great surprise.

"Got the thing all cut and dried, hey?" Goldlace continued in a quizzical way.

"You know just how the 'rastle is going to turn out before you begin," the High Horse added. "And if you are sure that you have got it all right, you ought to be able to make a heap of money by betting on it."

The mule man's face lit up, and he hauled out the buckskin bag in which he carried his funds, then looked inquiringly at the alcalde.

But the Mormon leader was deaf to the voice of the tempter.

"I am not a betting man!" he cried in a scornful tone.

"But if you think I can't handle this cock-sparrow, I will soon show you that you have made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"That is the way to talk!" the High Horse declared with a good-natured grin.

"Go in, lemons, even if you do get squeezed!" he continued.

"But what sort of a fight is this going to be, rough and tumble, or a regular ring picnic?" Goldlace asked.

"It is all one to me," the schoolmaster observed.

"A regular ring fight is the ticket, I reckon," the alcalde decided.

"That is regular rounds, and a minute between for rest!" exclaimed the mule man, who was the king sport of the camp.

"And, gen'lemen, I don't mind acting as referee, for I am well-posted on the rules, and as I couldn't get a bet on the fight, I haven't any money up on either of you and so will be able to give both a good, square deal!"

The contestants expressed themselves as being satisfied to allow the mule man to act.

"Both of you want seconds now," the referee remarked.

"Will you take me, schoolmaster?" exclaimed the High Horse.

"Certainly, and glad of the chance!" Jarrilla replied.

"You will act for me, Hiram," the elder said.

The old Danite chief nodded assent.

"Now then, the round lasts until one man is on the ground, when his second is at liberty to help him to his corner, a minute rest between rounds, and wrestling goes!" the referee remarked.

"Are you ready?"

The combatants nodded assent.

"Shake hands then, and go at it!"

"No shake hands for me!" cried the Mormon elder, angrily. "Look out for yourself!"

And then he made a rush at the schoolmaster, endeavoring with a succession of powerful blows to knock the top of his head off.

But it was the old story of science against brute force, a light, active man, remarkably quick on his legs, against a heavy, clumsy one.

The ponderous blows fell on the empty air, for the alcalde never succeeded in getting the schoolmaster within reach of his fists.

For a good half-minute he chased his antagonist around the ring, and then, utterly out of breath from his violent exertion, was forced to pause and drop his hands.

As soon as he paused, with lightning-like rapidity, the schoolmaster went at his man.

And the way he pounded and punched the helpless alcalde was a caution, finishing up the attack by a "right-hander" on the jaw which sent the Mormon elder over on his back as though he had been shot.

The crowd howled with delight, and it was as much as the referee could do, as he stood, watch in hand, to keep from joining in the yell.

King Hiram hastened to the assistance of the prostrated man, and he could not forbear saying:

"What did I tell you?"

It was fully a minute before the alcalde got on his feet, and when the mule man cried "Time!" Oakham abruptly announced that he had got "enough," and hastened away, followed by some uncomplimentary remarks from the crowd relative to his want of "sand."

CHAPTER XL.

GOLIGHTLY'S DECISION.

AND now, that our tale may proceed in regular order, we must transport the reader to the cabin of the blacksmith, and the time is two days after the one on which occurred the events described in our last chapter.

The blacksmith was at work in the little shop attached to the side of his cabin when the young miner known as the schoolmaster, and the High Horse of the Pacific, made their appearance.

Golightly looked askance as the two approached, for he feared that there had been some love passages between his girl and the young miner, and he did not at all approve of the affair.

"How are you?" saluted the young man, as he and his companion halted by the anvil.

"How'd'y," replied Golightly, shortly, keeping on with his work.

"I would like to speak with you upon a little business matter," observed the schoolmaster, not at all abashed by his cool reception.

"Ain't got time to do any talking," responded Golightly, grimly, banging away at the piece of iron which he was shaping on the anvil.

"Pleasant cuss you air for a small tea-party," suggested the High Horse, as he approached within reaching distance of the anvil.

The blacksmith was in a particularly bad humor. He was just in the condition to quarrel with somebody, and the words of the High Horse afforded him an excuse.

The moment the words of the High Horse reached his ears he flew into a passion.

"Do you come 'ere to insult me in front of my own 'ouse?" he cried, and he raised the heavy hammer which he had in his hand in menace.

"Say, old man, don't you throw that plaything round so loosely," the Californian warned.

"You might hit somebody with it, and if you should ever hit me, and I should find it out, I'd never forgive you."

"You scoundrel, if you don't clear away from 'ere I'll crack your skull!" and the angry blacksmith swung the heavy sledge angrily in the air to give due effect to his words.

Now the High Horse was not a man to stand any nonsense of this kind from anybody, and before Golightly really knew what had happened or how it had come about, he wrested the heavy hammer away from him as though it had been a mere child's toy, and then, taking the angry man by the throat, he shook him until every tooth in Golightly's head seemed to rattle.

"Be careful—you'll kill the man!" the schoolmaster interposed, really anxious for Golightly's bones.

"I wouldn't kill him for the world!" the other replied.

All I would keer to do would be to smash him into leetle bits and feed the dogs with him! Come, brace up and have some style about you!" And with this injunction he let go of the blacksmith, and the Englishman sunk upon the bench by the side of the anvil completely demoralized.

"Good 'eavens, do you want to murder me?" he gasped, all the fight completely taken out of him by the rough handling he had received.

"Murder you?" exclaimed the Californian, apparently in complete disgust at the idea; "wa-al, hang me if you ain't the hardest man to take a joke that I have struck in a month of Sunday."

"Why, I was only playing with you. If I had been in earnest thar wouldn't be much more than a grease-spot left of you now!"

"It's a blooming shame, so it is, for you to treat a man in this 'ere way," the Englishman protested.

"Treat did you say?" Goldlace cried, with alacrity. "Wa-al, now, you kin bet your bottom dollar you can't skeer a coon 'bout my size in that way."

"I'll take whisky, thank you."

"You'll get no whisky 'ere," growled the other, just beginning to feel like himself again.

"All right, I'll take w'otever kind of bug-juice you have handy; you needn't put yourself out on my account, you know."

By this time Golightly was on his feet and stood scowling at the young man.

"What is it you want of me, hanyway?" he asked.

"I came to speak in regard to your daughter," the young man replied.

"Well, what of 'er?"

"Her beauty and goodness have made a deep impression upon me, and I wish to get your consent to keep company with her."

"Oh, no!" cried the blacksmith, gruffly, and in an extremely contemptuous manner.

"If I take hold of you ag'in I'll shake you fer good!" Goldlace warned.

In alarm the Englishman retreated behind the anvil.

"What objection have you to me?" the schoolmaster asked.

The Englishman was about to make an abusive reply when he happened to catch the eyes of the Californian, and there was so much menace written in those steel-blue eyes that Golightly checked the desire and made answer in a proper fashion.

"My gal is promised to another man," he explained.

"Does she like him better than she does me?"

"I never axed her," was the tart reply.

"If she does, it's all right, and I haven't a word to say."

"I'll 'ave you to understand that it is a man about my size who is arranging this matter, and the gal 'asn't got anythink to do with it!" Go-

lightly exclaimed, with an attempt to appear dignified.

"Surely you wouldn't force your daughter to marry a man whom she does not like?" the schoolmaster exclaimed.

"If he even is squinting at such a thing he ought for to be kicked to death by crippled grasshoppers!" the High Horse declared.

"Oh, what does a gal know 'bout such things?" the blacksmith exclaimed, in a lofty manner.

"It may be all right in this 'ere blooming country, but it ain't the way we does in Hingland, you know."

"But you ain't in Hingland now, you know," the Californian retorted, with a laughable imitation of the other's manner.

"Then, am I to understand that no matter what your daughter may think about the matter you are not willing for me to pay my addresses to her?"

"No, I ain't," replied the father, bluntly. "She is promised to a better man than you will ever be, and you might as well make up your mind to take no for an answer."

"Supposing I don't?"

"Well, if you don't like it, you'll 'ave to lump it, I fancy!" replied the other, insolently.

"Well, since you won't give me any show to get the girl by fair means, I reckon I'll have to show you and the other man that this is a free country, and you can't play any old country games over here."

"Your daughter likes me better than she does anybody else, I am pretty certain," the young lover declared, "and since you must allow the course of true love to run smooth, blame yourself if there's trouble about the matter."

"Oh, I ain't afeard of your threats!" the Englishman replied.

"The party who is going to have my daughter is able for you, or a dozen like you, for that matter."

"That remains to be decided, and the trial may come off sooner than you expect," and with this rejoinder the schoolmaster turned upon his heel and departed, accompanied by the Californian, who, by an expressive pantomime, described the pleasure it would afford him to get the blacksmith in his clutches again, a desire that was not reciprocated by the Englishman.

"The alcalde will be too much for him, anyhow," Golightly muttered, as he returned to his anvil and again resumed work.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DEPARTURE.

Now we leap a day ahead again.

The blacksmith was at his work when the alcalde, attended by his body-guard of policemen, arrived.

The Mormon elder was careful never to go abroad without his attendants.

He did not intend to fall a victim to the secret slayer if he could avoid it by taking all possible precautions.

The deaths of the first two victims, though, had sent a chill to his heart.

Two of the four daggers that the road-agent had forced the blacksmith to make in the mountains had found scabbards in the breasts of the identical men for whom they had been intended.

Two more daggers remained.

One was for him and the other for the old-time Danite chief.

In the opinion of the alcalde, Buckingham was a fool to decide upon remaining in the mining-camp.

"He will fall a victim and go under!" the Mormon elder declared, debating the matter with himself, as he marched along toward the cabin of the blacksmith.

The death of Soapy Sam had decided the alcalde to seek safety in flight as soon as he could possibly arrange to set out.

And in order to baffle the secret foe he had resolved to start late at night, and it was to warn Golightly to have his daughter in readiness that the Mormon elder had now come.

"All right, I'll have her ready," the blacksmith promised when he learned what was required.

Then the alcalde returned to his cabin, and, aided by his satellites, made all needful preparations for the journey.

He had decided to strike due eastward to the head-waters of the Gila and make his way out by way of Fort Craig.

He had determined—so great was his dread of the mysterious road-agent—to take all of the ten men, his body-guard, with him, for, as he said to himself:

"If the fellow can get away with ten such men as I have selected then he must be Satan in person, and a hundred wouldn't be of any more use than ten."

Buckingham coincided with this opinion.

The Mormon elder had arranged that the party should depart at midnight; the moon being bright there wouldn't be any difficulty about traveling, and it was hoped by this device to throw the mysterious assassin off the track.

The affair was not kept secret, though.

How could it be when all of the ten men who composed the body-guard knew that they were to set out somewhere near midnight, and each

and every man-Jack of them was bent upon celebrating the departure from the camp by drinking all the liquor they could get hold of?

And ten more unsteady men never bestrode steeds than these trusty men, who had been selected for the express purpose of protecting the sacred person of the alcalde from harm, when they mounted their horses at King Hiram's command.

Buckingham had arranged to accompany the party until they were well on the journey, but he had steadfastly resisted the alcalde's entreaties to keep on with them.

Oakham was disgusted when he discovered the condition of his men.

"Why, hang it, King Hiram!" he exclaimed, "they are all drunk!"

"Yes, they have been indulging a little."

"A little! I should say so—four or five quarts of whisky apiece!" the alcalde exclaimed, in anger.

"Why, nearly every man is so drunk that he has about all he kin do to hold onto his horse."

"A nice condition they would be in for work if we should happen to run into a fight."

"No danger of that unless the road-agent goes for you, and even drunk as they are, ten of them ought to be a match for one man."

The alcalde shook his head doubtfully.

He did not feel so sure about this, for the road-agent was evidently no ordinary man, and he said as much to the ex-Danite.

"Oh, the boys will be all right after they get on the road," Buckingham replied.

"Half an hour in the saddle will sober them up wonderfully."

"Well, I hope so, but I doubt it dreadfully."

The expedition proceeded on its way, the Mormon elder and Buckingham riding in the advance, while the rest came straggling on behind in anything but a military fashion.

From the alcalde's cabin they rode to the shanty of the blacksmith.

The Englishman and his daughter were in readiness and mounted the horses that the elder had provided.

The girl had cast a veil over her face to conceal her tears which were flowing freely and fast, despite the stern admonitions of her father not to allow all the world to see her make a fool of herself.

It had been arranged that the party should ride to Springtown, another little Mormon settlement twenty miles to the eastward, and as there was a Mormon elder in charge of that camp, another man of the Jonathan Oakham stamp, he would marry the alcalde to the girl, and then the father was to return.

As Buckingham had predicted, the ride had the effect of sobering the drunken fellows up wonderfully, and by the time ten miles were covered "Richard was himself again!"

King Hiram called the alcalde's attention to the condition of the men and then said he "reckoned" he had come far enough and would turn back.

The alcalde pressed him to ride on as far as Springtown and assist at the wedding.

"Oh, no, I don't care to witness the sacrifice," the other returned, bluntly.

"The child don't care two straws for you; she's forced into this marriage, and I tell you what it is, Oakham, when your day of reckoning comes thar'll be a mighty long account chalked up ag'in' you."

"You will have your joke," the alcalde said, with a grin, covering up the annoyance which he felt at the plain words of the other.

"You'll find it no joke one of these days, I reckon," the ex-Danite replied, and then with a wave of his hand he rode off, taking the back trail.

"Curse his impudence!" muttered the Mormon elder, "but he presumes upon our long acquaintance, and then he always had an evil tongue. Anyhow, it don't matter, for I don't believe he's long for this world."

"He has elected to remain in the camp, and the chances are big that the iron dagger will rip him open before he is a week older, and I reckon I don't keer much if it does, either."

And then the elder spurred up his horse and galloped on after his party.

The Danite chief went on his lonely way, his mind full of gloomy thoughts.

"I ought by rights to interfere and save that girl," he muttered.

"This old wretch don't deserve to secure such a prize, but then it's none of my business, and if the girl's father chooses to sacrifice her I don't suppose any one has a right to say anything about it."

"Strange what a weight hangs over me tonight. Is it a presentiment of danger?"

Hardly had the words left his lips when out from behind a huge rock where he had evidently lain in ambush rode the white figure of the mysterious road-agent.

The hour of peril had come.

CHAPTER XLII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

ON went the alcalde and his party until some fifteen miles were passed.

After parting with Buckingham, the Mormon elder had essayed to address a few consoling re-

marks to the girl, but tears—idle tears—were all the replies his endeavors elicited.

This enraged the blacksmith, and he scolded the girl, but the elder interposed and in his smooth way endeavored to get on the right side of the maid.

"Don't scold her, brother Golightly," he said. "She is young yet, and proper understanding is a thing that sometimes only arrives with years."

"In the time to come she will no doubt comprehend, brother Golightly, that we are doing everything for the best now, although at present it does not so appear to her."

"Satan and death! we are entrapped!"

The change in the man's tone was wonderful; from the wheedling, honeyed, accents of the Mormon elder, seeking to make a convert, it had abruptly changed into the fierce exclamation of the desperado suddenly brought to bay and confronted with a foe when least expected.

There was abundant reason for the exclamation.

The man of the iron dagger had appeared—or rather had appeared in double force, for there were two horsemen, who, appearing from behind the rocks, blocked the way.

Two figures clad in white from head to heel, and a revolver glistened in each hand, and behind the horsemen came a third steed, which seemed to bear a strange burden upon its back.

It was apparently a man, but he lay extended at full length on the back of the horse, with his face upturned to the sky.

A sickening sensation crept over the portly form of the Mormon elder, and for a moment he shook as though stricken with palsy.

Why?

He fancied that he had recognized both the steed and the rider extended so strangely upon his back.

It was the steed of the Danite chieftain, if the alcalde had ever looked upon the beast.

And the rider lying across the back of the brute, the head on one side and the legs on the other.

If it was not King Hiram Buckingham, then the Mormon elder knew not the man.

"Oho, alcalde of Babylen Bar, I bring ye a present!" quoth the foremost one of the white riders.

And then bringing the black steed up alongside of his own, he slapped it on the back with his revolver, and the brute with its motionless rider came up to the alcalde at a round gallop.

It was the horse of King Hiram Buckingham—it was the once dreaded Danite chieftain, dead on the back of the horse, and in his breast the iron dagger was buried.

The Mormon elder was so appalled with terror at the sight that it was as much as he could do to retain his seat in the saddle.

It was all plain to him now.

King Hiram had been waylaid on his homeward road and slain, then by a detour the slayer had managed to get in front of him.

"Four daggers were forged in the mountain pass; you remember the tale the blacksmith told?" the road-agent exclaimed.

"The first was for Sharp Bill, and he was stricken down in the center of the camp; the second for Soapy Sam, and he felt the point of the iron cut its way to his heart down by the San Francisco's stream."

"The third dagger was destined for the best man of you all, King Hiram Buckingham, and with your own eyes you have proof that the old Danite leader felt the thrust of the avenger."

"But there was a fourth dagger—and that fourth dagger is for you, Jonathan Oakham, for you, with your soul stained with a hundred crimes."

"What have I done?" cried the Mormon elder, in an agony of terror, although he was surrounded by ten well-armed men.

"What have you done?" cried the masked man, in scorn. "What haven't you done, liar, thief, murderer?"

"Remember the Maxwell massacre on the banks of the Virgin river."

"You alone of all the men who had a hand in that bloody affair still cumber the earth."

"Your companions in crime have fallen by the hand of the avenger; first the hirelings and then the masters, that was the oath!"

"It was a fearful crime, and fearfully has it been avenged, and now, you, the principal in the deed, must suffer!"

"Jonathan Oakham, are you prepared to die? Have you made your peace with Heaven? for your time has come!"

"No, no; I will not die!" yelled the alcalde, inspired with a sudden desperation, born of the deadly danger that so closely threatened him.

"You are crazy to imagine that you two men can hope to cope with the force at my command."

"Away, ere I give the signal for the attack which will surely bring to you the death which your crimes merit."

Despite the superiority of his numbers, the Mormon elder would much rather have avoided a battle than invited one.

"Golightly, take your daughter and get out of the way if you do not wish to stop bullets intended for these scoundrels!" the road-agent commanded.

The old blacksmith, thoroughly frightened by the prospect, did not wait for a second bidding, but laying hold of the bridle of the animal upon which the girl was mounted, drew off to the right, and taking a position upon some elevated ground, prepared with eager eyes to behold the result of the threatened encounter.

When the blacksmith and his daughter turned their steeds upon the little rising ground five hundred yards or so away, the road-agent, who had done all the talking, rose in his stirrups, and cried out:

"Now, you blood-stained Mormon hounds, feel the weight of the avenger's blow!"

And with the word both put spurs to their horses and charged full at the alcalde and his men.

It was a desperate deed for two men to thus boldly attack eleven, but the desperadoes were already demoralized by the strange events of the night.

The death of their best fighting man, bold King Hiram Buckingham, who heretofore had always succeeded in coming off victorious in his encounters, had struck a deadly dread to their souls.

If they had been captained by any such a man, possibly they might have stood their ground, and made a decent fight; but the Mormon elder himself gave the signal for a stampede.

The moment the charge was made he lost his head, became "rattled," to use the vernacular, and banged away with his revolver, although the white riders were not within range.

His followers, demoralized by the example, followed suit, and the sharp reports of their revolver-shots echoed amid the rocks.

But not a bullet did the white riders waste.

Good calculators in regard to distances, they knew to a foot almost the carrying capacity of their pieces, and reserved their fire until they came within range, and then they opened upon the Mormons, all huddled together, with deadly execution.

Every shot seemed to tell.

Five of the bravos fell in as many seconds, and with the fall of the first man the Mormon elder took to flight.

The rest were not slow to follow the example of their chief.

Over the plain they raced, not keeping in a body, but separating as widely as possible, each man making for the nearest shelter, eager to escape the death-hail rattling through the air.

The Mormon elder had fixed his eyes upon a huge mass of rocks well to the left from the spot where the battle had taken place.

Beyond the rocks was a wild and broken country, and the alcalde hoped that if he was able to reach it he might be able to escape from his desperate and determined foes.

Oakham was mounted on a particularly good horse, and he fancied that, owing to the speed of his steed, he could outstrip his pursuers; but the white riders were well mounted also, and they were holding their own if not gaining on the fleeing alcalde.

The rest of the band, who had not been disabled in the fight, finding that the victors had turned to the left in pursuit of the alcalde, bore off gradually to the right, and finally disappeared in the broken country which lay in that direction.

Jonathan Oakham rode for his life.

He had discovered that the white riders had abandoned the pursuit of the others and were both upon his track.

In such a desperate strait the human mind works quickly, if it does not become confused and neglect to work at all.

But in the presence of this deadly danger the wits of the saint seemed to be sharpened.

His plan of action was simple, yet excellent.

The moment he passed the giant rock, which was almost square in its formation and rose abruptly from the ground, he intended to pull his horse sharply to the right and halt behind the rock, hid by it from the sight of his pursuers and then, when they came around the corner, riding at breakneck speed and within a couple of yards of his position, he would open fire on them with his other revolver, not a barrel of which had yet been discharged.

If he could not succeed in killing or disabling his foes at such a distance, fate was surely against him, and he might as well give up, realizing that his hour had come.

But it really seemed as if the dark angel of destiny had stepped into the list against the alcalde, for in turning the corner of the rock, which he did at full speed, not slacking rein in the least, so as to give his pursuers the impression that he had no idea of halting, his horse stumbled, came down on his knees, and the Mormon elder, totally unprepared for such an event, was hurled violently over his head, catching the worst kind of a "cropper," to use the sporting term, and yet, luckily, he alighted upon the soft earth in such a way that he was not materially injured by the fall although pretty well shaken up.

But this was not the worst feature of the accident.

He had thrust his empty revolver into his pocket and drawn the unused one, so as to be ready to deal death upon his foes the moment

they should appear, and the shock of his fall had sent the weapon whirling through the air, and it had fallen he knew not where.

His knife—an eight-inch bowie—was his last resource, and as he rose to his feet, he drew the weapon, determined to sell his life as dearly as possible.

In this the hour of his doom the alcalde was displaying a courage which he had never before exhibited.

It was the courage of despair.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MASK REMOVED.

THERE is little doubt that the alcalde's plan would have been productive of good results, if fate had permitted him to carry it out, for the white riders came around the rock at such speed that when they perceived the Mormon elder dismounted and his horse cantering off in the distance, thoroughly frightened by the skirmish in which he had played so prominent a part, they were obliged to pull their steeds up so quickly that the animals were forced by the cruel Mexican curb bits they wore back upon their haunches, and they sat upright like so many dogs.

The white rider who had done the talking was in the advance, and in a trice he was off his horse.

Perceiving that the alcalde flourished a knife, he shoved his revolver into its pocket and drew from his belt the last one of the iron daggers—the one which bore the letter A stamped upon the end of its handle, and hastened toward his destined prey.

"Who are you?" yelled the Mormon, as he beheld the white rider advance with determined step, "and why have you taken up this quarrel? What has the death of the Maxwells to do with you?"

"I am the younger brother of the murdered man, and in my Southwestern home the news of the tragedy reached me, and I have sworn never to know rest or peace until every man who had a hand in the bloody work should yield up his life as penance for the dead.

"I am Stephen Maxwell, but you know me better by another name!"

And then tearing off his mask he revealed a face only too well known by the alcalde.

"The schoolmaster!" he cried, and ground his teeth in anger when he reflected how easily he had been tricked.

And it was indeed the young miner!

Most skillfully had he played his part—most completely had he avoided detection.

"And now we are man to man and knife to knife!" the schoolmaster continued. "With your death comes the fulfillment of my oath: First the hirelings and then the master!"

With an angry oath the alcalde sprung upon his desperate foe.

He fancied that the bowie-knife gave him an advantage, but he was no match for the experienced knife-fighter of the Southwest who had been used to handling such a weapon since early boyhood.

The schoolmaster caught the desperate slash of the alcalde's blade upon his left arm, around which he had hastily rolled part of the white disguise he wore, and then, before the Mormon elder could recover himself, with a single powerful stroke he drove the iron dagger into the breast of the guilty man, the point of the weapon piercing the very heart of the saint.

With a hollow groan the alcalde threw up his hands and staggered back, then sunk to the earth with his face upturned to the moon.

The fight was over—the vendetta ended; for the Mormon alcalde, Jonathan Oakham, had gone to his last account with all his crimes fresh upon his hypocrite's soul.

"A clean lick as I ever see'd struck, I swear!" exclaimed the other horseman, and the tones revealed that the rider was no other than Gideon Goldlace, the High Horse.

At the last moment, when the schoolmaster realized that he needed assistance to prevent the girl from being carried away, and so utterly lost to him forever, he had revealed his secret to Goldlace and asked his aid, feeling confident from what he had seen of the big-hearted giant that he could be fully trusted.

The High Horse entered at once into the spirit of the thing, and the result the reader knows.

Concealing their horses amid the rocks and removing their disguises, the two made a wide circle and came up to where the blacksmith and his daughter still stood upon the rising ground, uncertain what to do.

The schoolmaster pretended that he and his friend had followed the party on foot, intending to rescue the girl if possible.

Despite this admission, Golightly was heartily glad to see the two, for, as he remarked, he had witnessed enough bloodshed to last him for the rest of his life, and the quicker he got back to the camp the better he would like it.

Then he related to the two the story of the tragic encounter.

The schoolmaster suggested that they had better see what had become of the alcalde.

Of course, the body was easily found, and the iron dagger, still in the breast, gave ample proof in regard to the doer of the deed.

Then the two pretended to find the horses which they had hidden, and mounting them the party took the trail to the camp.

When they arrived there they found the town in a ferment, for the fugitives had roused the camp with their tale of blood.

The citizens, in public meeting next day, resolved to do all in their power to solve the road-agent mystery, and as the Mormons had lost all their leaders the Gentiles "ran" the thing, and when it came to electing an alcalde the High Horse "took the bull by the horns" and nominated the schoolmaster; and he was unanimously elected, too, for the Mormons were so demoralized that they did not attempt to put up a man against him.

The mystery of the road-agent was never revealed, nor was the road-agent ever heard of again, although a strange fact transpired:—one night a small parcel was tossed through the window of Golightly's cabin, and when he opened it he discovered that it contained the exact sum of money which the masked robber had exacted from him on Lone Mountain!

A few more words and our task is o'er.

Now that the Mormon alcalde was out of the way, the blacksmith did not oppose the union of the lovers, and they were speedily united.

Being the first wedding ever solemnized in the camp, it was duly celebrated.

The Mormons, lacking leaders, gradually were pushed to the wall, and within a year from the tragic events described, few saints remained in the camp, which, however, prospered, as though a weight had been removed.

The High Horse did not tarry long in Babylon Bar after the marriage of his pard.

The pushing of the railroads through the desert into Mexico attracted a horde of adventurers, and as Goldlace was of a restless disposition, he concluded to try his luck to the southward, and of his adventures in that locality we may have something to relate hereafter.

Major Bum accompanied him.

And in regard to the mysterious road-agent and the marvelous appearance of the iron dagger on the rocks and houses, the major had a word to say before he left the camp.

"Come to think of it, boys, a magic lantern would work that trick to the queen's taste. Jake, set 'em up again, and mind you speak to me in regard to settling my leetle bill next Tuesday, for sure!"

THE END.

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